Eastern Michigan University
DigitalCommons@EMU

Senior Honors Theses | Honors College

2004

A General's Self-Depiction: The Political Strategies of Gaius Julius Caesar as Seen in the Commentarii de Bello Gallico

Freedom-Kai Phillips

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.emich.edu/honors

Recommended Citation
Phillips, Freedom-Kai, "A General's Self-Depiction: The Political Strategies of Gaius Julius Caesar as Seen in the Commentarii de Bello Gallico" (2004). *Senior Honors Theses.* Paper 109.

This Open Access Senior Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at DigitalCommons@EMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@EMU. For more information, please contact lib-ir@emich.edu.

A General's Self-Depiction: The Political Strategies of Gaius Julius Caesar as Seen in the Commentarii de Bello Gallico

Abstract
Gaius Julius Caesar was a ruthless military leader, a dangerous politician, and a cunning historian. "A General's Self-Depiction" examines an important episode in the *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* to assess the political motivations underlying the account. The details of Caesar's first British expedition (55 B.C.E.) are scrutinized for deliberate inaccuracies and strategic shadings of the truth to disclose the long-term political goals behind the nuances and "spin" of his British narrative. I prove that Gaius Julius Caesar was a calculating, purposeful man, who had both stated and self-interested unstated goals in nearly every undertaking.

Degree Type
Open Access Senior Honors Thesis

Department
History and Philosophy

First Advisor
Dr. James P. Holoka

Keywords
Caesar, Julius Military leadership, Caesar, Julius De bello Gallico. English

This open access senior honors thesis is available at DigitalCommons@EMU: http://commons.emich.edu/honors/109

A GENERAL'S SELF-DEPICTION:

THE POLITICAL STRATIGIES OF GAIUS JULIUS CAESAR AS SEEN IN THE *COMMENTARII DE BELLO GALLICO*

By

Freedom-Kai Phillips

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the

Eastern Michigan University

Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for Graduation

With Honors in History

Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan on this date

_____

_____
Supervising Instructor

_____
Department Head

Senior Honors Thesis

ABSTRACT

Author: Freedom-Kai Phillips
Department: History
Area: Classical Studies
Supervising Instructor: Dr. James P. Holoka
Honors Adviser: Dr. James P. Holoka
Title: A GENERAL'S SELF-DEPICTION: THE POLITICAL STRATIGIES OF GAIUS JULIUS CAESAR AS SEEN IN THE *COMMENTARII DE BELLO GALLICO*
Length: 20pp. Completion Date: 1-14-04

Gaius Julius Caesar was a ruthless military leader, a dangerous politician, and a cunning historian. "A General's Self-Depiction" examines an important episode in the *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* to assess the political motivations underlying the account. The details of Caesar's first British expedition (55 B.C.E.) are scrutinized for deliberate inaccuracies and strategic shadings of the truth to disclose the long-term political goals behind the nuances and "spin" of his British narrative. I prove that Gaius Julius Caesar was a calculating, purposeful man, who had both stated and self-interested unstated goals in nearly every undertaking.

THE POLITICAL STRATIGIES OF GAIUS JULIUS CAESAR AS SEEN IN THE *COMMENTARII DE BELLO GALLICO*

Gaius Julius Caesar was a meticulous, deliberate man, who never acted without purpose. To properly understand his contributions to history, one must first understand the goals behind his actions. To accomplish this, we must scrutinize his *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*.[1] The first section will offer a brief history of Caesar's political career up to and during the Gallic Wars. The second section will summarize his account of the British landing, as an example Caesar's written works, which many historians consider to have possible inaccuracies. The third section will examine in more detail his depiction of both his failures as a general and any possible ulterior motives for the expedition. The final section will discuss the social and political value of his *Commentarii*. In the end, I will show that Caesar utilized his *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* as a means of propaganda to justify his military conquests, manipulate the masses, and imprint his seal on the letter of history.

Caesar's Political Goals:

Born in 100 B.C.E.[2], Gaius Julius Caesar quickly grew to have an astute ability to learn and apply lessons both taught and observed. During his younger years Caesar, a member of a long line of Roman nobility, observed Sulla marching on Rome and breaking the most important rule in Rome (to never enter Rome with an army), the ensuing civil war between Marius and Sulla and finally the death of his uncle Marius during his seventh consulship.

[1] Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*, trans. Carolyn Hammond (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996). Subsequent parenthetical references are to this edition of the *Bellum Gallicum* (*BG*).

[2] Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*, trans. Carolyn Hammond (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), xlvii; Christian Meier, *Caesar: a Biography*, trans. David McLintock (New York: MJF Books, 1982), 51.

Living up to his noble name, at a young age Caesar showed strong political aspirations. Beginning in 69 B.C.E. Caesar rose in the Roman political ranks, first as quaestor in Spain, then acquiring the rank of aedile in 65. However, the first step towards total power came in 63 B.C.E when Caesar became pontifex maximus (in charge of the state religion), which offered him a golden opportunity to increase his social standing. More importantly, however, Caesar held a "front rank [in] Rome's senatorial aristocracy,"[3] which offered an invaluable learning experience.[4]

Caesar learned that social popularity was the key to political power and that only through money could one rise in the political ranks. This coupled with an army marked the backbone of the Roman governmental structure. Moreover, upon the victorious return of Pompey from the east, Caesar learned another valuable lesson, which would in turn bring about the fall of the *res publica*: service of Rome did not necessarily bring about political respect.[5] At this point, Caesar stopped working in service of Rome and began working solely for himself.

After the Bona Dea scandal and subsequent divorce of his second wife, Pompeia, at the end of 62, Caesar in early January of 61 hastily took a governorship in Hispania Ulterior, a province in southern Spain. However, creditors, whom Caesar paid with a loan from Crassus, hindered his appointment. In Spain Caesar declared, "I for my part would rather be the first man here than the second man in Rome,"[6] thus laying the seeds of authoritarianism. Having a taste of absolute power, Caesar wanted to test the waters back in Rome. To achieve his goal of political power, he adopted an alliance with two people who

[3] Meier, 162.
[4] Meier, 133-166.
[5] Meier, 178.
[6] Meier, 182.

compensated for what Caesar lacked. Caesar had ambition, yet little money or military power. Thus, in 60 B.C.E., Caesar along with Marcus Licinius Crassus, the richest man in Rome, and Rome's military legend Pompey the great, created the first triumvirate. Its aim was "to realize jointly certain objectives that they had failed to achieve alone." [7]

Consequently, Caesar achieved the highest rank in Rome, that of consul, in 59, with the promise to receive a province to govern. Caesar, however, had a promise to keep: he had to put legislation through for both Crassus and Pompey. Many in the senate, however, opposed this, primarily because they could see the rationale behind his action; the senate adopted a new tactic, essentially "a boycott on politics."[8] Eventually Caesar upheld his end, and both Pompey and Crassus were content. Again, however, Caesar learned the Roman political scene was no place for a man of ambition; it simply hindered his aspirations. Finally, the senate granted Caesar the province of *Gallia Cisalpina* for five years,[9] marking the beginning of Caesar's formal transition from politician to general.

Between 58 and 55 B.C.E., Caesar began to institute his own form of leadership and to consolidate the whole of Gaul, tribe by tribe. In 58, the Helvetii started a mass migration through Caesar's province (*BG* 1.7). Upon hearing word of this, Caesar denied the Helvetii relocation because of the memory of consul Lucius Cassius' death at their hands (*BG* 1.7). Ultimately, Caesar made use of this opportunity to initiate full-scale war on the Helvetii and eventually all of Gaul. Once the Helvetii and their allies had been decisively defeated, suffering 258,000 casualties (*BG* 1.29), Caesar moved on to Ariovistus and the Sequani, who had initiated hostilities against the Aedui (long-time friends of Rome). Again, this

[7] Meier, 188.
[8] Meier, 211.
[9] Meier, 213.

marked another Roman victory, as the second in a long line of Gallic tribes who opposed Caesar fell because of that choice. [10]

The following year Caesar moved northward to conquer the Belgae, who were reportedly plotting against the Roman people (*BG* 2.01). He spent the whole of 57 consolidating his control of the Belgic tribes and pushing forward toward the Rhine River.[11] The following year, Caesar pushed to the western coast of modern-day France, suppressed upheavals, subdued the maritime tribes, and made the initial steps to cross to Britain.[12] He had up to that point suffered no formal defeat, in turn offering both total control of Gaul, and immense wealth.

Caesar's Commentary on the British Landing:

As Caesar admits, it was late in the campaign season, and in this part of the world, "winter [came] early" (*BG* 4.20). However, rather than consolidating the rest of eastern Gaul and setting up proper winter quarters, he decided to undergo a risky operation: to cross the channel and invade Britain. Ancient scholars like Pytheas, who preceded Caesar, and Diodorus Siculus and Pliny the Elder contributed only fragmented accounts to Roman knowledge of Britain.[13] Nevertheless, at Caesar's time the image of Britain was of, "a place

[10] Caesar, *BG* book 1; "Caesar's campaigns in Gaul (58-50)," *Athena Review 1.4* (1998). http://www.athenapub.com/caesarg1.htm (24 Nov 2003).

[11] Caesar, *BG* book II.

[12] Caesar, *BG* book III.

[13] Thomas Rice Holmes, *Ancient Britain and the Invasions of Julius Caesar* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1907), 219.

beyond the limits of the Romans' world."[14] Even though Britain was spectacularly far from Rome (both geographically and in the Roman imagination), it is only roughly twenty-five miles from Gaul and many of the Gallic tribes had received British auxiliaries in previous engagements against Caesar; that made the Britons enemies of the Roman people. Moreover, a reconnaissance would be important prior to a larger invasion. Caesar attempted to gather intelligence about his destination from merchants who crossed over to Britain for trade, but no one could offer much information. Specifically, Caesar needed a reliable account of "the numbers of peoples living there, their skill in warfare, their established customs, or which harbors were suitable for a fleet" (*BG* 4.20). Consequently, Caesar sent Gaius Volusenus to reconnoiter the destination (*BG* 4.21).

While Volusenus was gone, Caesar traveled to the land of the Morini, namely Portus Itius, where the channel crossing was shortest, to gather his fleet constructed the previous year to face the maritime tribes (*BG* 3.09), and to prepare for the crossing. Envoys from both Britain and a majority of the Morini approached Caesar. The former promised obedience to Roman rule of Britain, while the latter apologized for previous attacks on the grounds of ignorance, and pledged their allegiance to Caesar and the Roman people (*BG* 4.21). This pleased Caesar, for he did not want to leave his back exposed, and it was too late in the season to undertake a campaign against the Morini before the British landing (*BG* 4.22). By this point Caesar had accumulated eighty transport vessels, however, poor weather forced an additional eighteen vessels off course. He judged the former sufficient for the British crossing, since only two legions, the VII and X, were departing; the latter were assigned to carry their cavalry. Before leaving, Caesar commissioned Quintus Titurius Sabinus and

[14] P.C.N. Stewart, "Inventing Britain: the Roman Creation and Adaptation of an Image," *Britannia*, 26 (1995) 3.

Lucius Aurunculeius Cotta to lead the rest of his army against the Menapii and the districts of the Morini who had sent no envoys. Moreover, Publius Sulpicius Rufus was left the essential task of maintaining a safe harbor (*BG* 4.22). After these preparations, Caesar took advantage of some good weather and embarked around midnight, ordering the cavalry to follow as soon as possible.

Arriving early the next morning, Caesar's men spied opposing forces stationed on the cliffs overlooking the beach, and concluded the situation unfavorable for a landing, therefore Caesar ordered the fleet to travel six-and-a-half miles up the coast, hoping for a more advantageous landing point on an open shore (*BG* 4.23) (see fig.1-2). However, the Britons typically used very mobile battle chariots; because of this, they had already moved into position to counter the Roman landing by the time the ships arrived. Since Caesar's transport vessels had deep hulls, they could not be beached, and the solders had to both find their footing and fight in deep water (*BG* 4.24). Caesar observed the crisis facing his men and ordered the warships to be maneuvered to the exposed flanks of the Britons. This slowed the Britons' assault and allowed the Romans to turn the tide. At this point the *aquilifer* (eagle-bearer) of the X legion appealed to the gods, and shouted, "Jump down soldiers, unless you want to betray our Eagle to the enemy—I at least shall have done my duty to the Republic and to my commander" (*BG* 4.25). With this rallying cry, the *aquilifer* jumped overboard and marched towards the heart of the battle. This in turn rallied the Roman solders and induced them to go over the side too, ultimately leading to a rout of the opposition (*BG* 4.26).

Four days after the initial skirmish, the cavalry transports set sail; however, upon their approach, a sudden, fierce storm forced many back, while others were flung westward

down the coast (*BG* 4.28). Moreover, due to a full moon, the high tide, coupled with the ferocity of the storm, damaged many of the original transports and warships as well (*BG* 4.29). This troubled Caesar, for, since the expedition was not meant to be lengthy, he had not requisitioned food for his troops while still in Gaul; moreover, with the sole means of transportation in shambles, Caesar ordered immediate safeguards to offset every eventuality. He hoped to buy enough time to find food, repair his ships, and construct suitable defenses to protect his diminutive camp (*BG* 4.30). He did find ample grain in the fields surrounding his camp, though not without problems; on one occasion, legion VII was violently ambushed while gathering grain and might have fallen but for Caesar's prompt rescue.[15]

After the ships were finally repaired, Caesar took advantage of clear weather and ordered a return to the Gallic mainland before the approaching autumnal equinox. However, two of the transports were unable to hold course and were forced to land further south, in the land of the Morini (*BG* 4.36). As Caesar recounts, 300 men disembarked and marched towards Portus Itius but were attacked by Morini in hopes of booty. A contingent of 6000 Morini surrounded the smaller Roman body but found no easy victory. On hearing of this skirmish, Caesar ordered the mass of his cavalry to their assistance (*BG* 4.37). The charging horsemen forced the Morini to retreat. An infuriated Caesar assigned Titus Labienus to discipline the Morini for their renewed hostilities. He then retired to his winter quarters in the land of the Belgae (*BG* 4.37).

Examination of Caesar's Account:

[15] J. F. C. Fuller, *Julius Caesar: Man, Soldier, and Tyrant* (New Brunswick, NJ: Da Capo Press, 1965), 122.

The first expedition to Britain was problematic from the get-go; this is evident in Caesar's account. There are three clear elements worth discussing: first, Caesar's unnerving command decisions; second, his motives for action; finally, his depiction of events. Ultimately, Caesar was determined to utilize the first British expedition as a political and economic catapult.

Caesar's operation in Britain was a decision stemming from arrogance and terrible judgment. First, by his own admission, it was late in the season; in fact, it was late August, which offered little room for error.[16] Moreover, because of the time of year, the seas were more treacherous, another problem in an already unpredictable situation. The campaign was doomed from the onset. Ultimately, the unfortunate results of the operation could have been avoided, if the British expedition had been put off until the following year.

Caesar had little knowledge of his destination, apart from folklore. He attempted unsuccessfully to acquire reliable intelligence on Britain from local tribes and traders, but "no one could properly inform him about the land and its people."[17] To compensate for the lack of reliable intelligence, Caesar sent Gaius Volusenus ahead to conduct a thorough reconnaissance and to report back with great speed. Volusenus returned five days later, but with very little to offer Caesar. He had not even disembarked, for fear of "[putting] his safety in barbarian hands."[18] Thus, Caesar had very little of substance to plan an operation around. This lack of intelligence, combined with the time of year, and subsequent weather conditions, made Caesar's decision ill advised, even foolish.

---

[16] Fuller, 122.
[17] Meier, 281.
[18] Meier, 80.

Finally, Caesar hurriedly outfitted and organized the British expedition. The expedition was "so hastily equipped that supplies of food were not taken."[19] Also, Caesar left his cavalry to cross over later—both serious miscalculations right at the outset. At first glance the operation would seem to be only a short-term engagement. However it is always proper in time of war to prepare for the unseen, in this case by requisitioning an appropriate amount of food. Moreover, cavalry was of the utmost importance in ancient warfare. Though the Romans were not cavalry dependent, embarking without an integral part of his forces left Caesar with a "one-armed army,"[20] able to repel and attack, but unable to pursue.

Caesar misjudged the complexity of the British expedition. Why did he take such risks in mounting the first British expedition, and what were his underlying motivations for this hasty, ill-conceived expedition?

Caesar's Ulterior Motives:

When Caesar decided to invade Britain, he offered two rationales: first, the Gauls had "in almost all our wars" (*BG* 4.20) received auxiliaries from that area; thus the Britons were by definition enemies of Rome. Second, he deemed it valuable simply to gain first-hand knowledge of Britain for a future expedition, saying "it would be a great advantage to…land on the island and observe the…people…localities, harbors, and approaches"(*BG* 4.20). However, were these Caesar's only motives? If not, what might have enticed a general to place his army in unwarranted danger?

Caesar clearly wanted to pacify Gaul, and by 55 B.C.E. he had done so magnificently. All that remained were revolts and loose ends. The former could only be

[19] Fuller, 121.
[20] Fuller, 74.

dealt with once they erupted; however, the latter were within Caesar's present capabilities. Thus, at first glance, Caesar had realistic and plausible goals in crossing to Britain. However, he had ulterior motives for endangering an already glorious campaign season.

The nullification of British support for the Gauls could only be achieved through an armed expedition, but why not wait for the right moment? Patience in this situation would have offered many advantages: Caesar might have found better intelligence or been contacted by more British envoys. The weather would not have been as formidable a concern at the onset of a new season. One expedition might have been enough, if more discretion had been shown. Why undertake so hastily a voyage of such importance and complexity? The answer lies in Caesar's secondary motivations.

Caesar demonstrated great determination in the execution of the expedition to Britain. Revenge, overconfidence, money, and power all seem plausible reasons for that determination. Caesar wanted revenge for his men who had fallen under a British sword. In the year prior, the Aremoric tribes had revolted while Caesar was absent for winter.[21] Upon his return, the Osismi, Lexovii, Namnetes, Ambriliati, Morini, Diablintes, and Menapii all commenced hostilities with British support, causing Caesar marginal losses (*BG* 3.9). Feeling invincible, Caesar set out to extract retribution for his losses; this, however, simply reflects Caesar's account.

Money and prestige were the real motivations for Caesar's British expeditions. In May 54 B.C.E., Cicero wrote to Trebatius Testa in Gaul saying, "I hear in Britain there is not an ounce of either gold or silver. If that is so, I advise you to capture some war-chariot,

[21] "The Landings of Caesar in Britain, 55 and 54 BC," *Athena Review 1.1* (1996). http://www.athenapub.com/caesar1.htm (24 Nov 2003).

and post back to me as soon as you can."[22] This suggests Cicero thought money was a possible motive for the first expedition. Moreover, with the British landing, Caesar mimicked Pompey's eastern conquests, but on a grander scale.[23] Furthermore, it offered political and financial prestige in Rome and counterbalanced the social standing of the consuls of that year, Pompey and Crassus, Caesar's political allies. Both are compelling reasons to justify a rash stream of decisions, which doomed the mission from the onset.

Caesar's Account—Accurate Reporting or Devious Propaganda?

It is important to judge whether Caesar's account accurately depicts these problems. Does Caesar, in his *Commentaries*, explain why he made such ill-conceived decisions before and during the expedition? And does he tell the truth about his reasons for invading Britain? Or does he simply offer a façade?

Caesar acknowledges the mistakes he made during the first British campaign. He admits he started too late, lacked intelligence, and departed Gaul without his cavalry. However, does a mere reference accurately portray the importance of such miscalculations? Caesar simply mentions these errors and then distracts the reader from them by highlighting thrilling moments, such as the heroics of the *aquilifer* in the British landing (*BG* 4.25).

Furthermore, Caesar hardly mentions his poor organization and planning, or the relative failure of the operation as a whole. On one occasion, the VII Legion was ambushed while gathering the daily ration of grain for the camp (*BG* 4.32). If Caesar had brought proper rations from Gaul, this problem would not have occurred. Yet, Caesar offers this

[22] Cicero, *Letters to His Friends*, trans. W. Glynn Williams, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959), 29.

[23] Meier, 281.

event not as a failure in planning on his part, but rather to show his omniscient ability to save all. In every crisis Caesar's depiction stresses not the failure of the event, but his abilities as a general.

Finally, Caesar occasionally gives a census of enemy dead, but rarely of his own losses. He either states individual fatalities outright, as was the case in the death of Piso (*BG* 4.12); uses ambiguous references like "hard pressed" (*BG* 4.32), or "receiving only a few wounds" (*BG* 4.37); or omits casualties altogether, for example, after the first British landing. Caesar carefully decides what numbers to discuss and what to exclude. Logically the Roman public would adore a general who slaughtered many an enemy, and Caesar did just that; but the mob would show greater support for a general who—so far as they knew—had very few losses.

Caesar discusses his primary motives openly, yet they alone do not seem to warrant his rash actions. Understandably, the elimination of British support to the Gauls was crucial, and an observation of Britain for a forthcoming invasion would be priceless. However, as shown above, other motives played an important role in the timing of the expedition. Caesar wanted revenge, felt untouchable, and sought riches and power, and justifiably, he mentions none of these secondary motives.

Caesar clearly felt invincible after the campaign season of 55 B.C.E. He had, in four years, conquered a majority of Gaul, crossed the Rhine, and stretched his power to the edge of the Roman world. He was now seeking retribution from the British for their support of the Gauls, but in what form? Blood, booty, and political clout in Gaul were paramount. However, he mentions only revenge, because to do so might have damaged his *dignitas*.

Clearly the first British campaign in 55 B.C.E. posed logistical and tactical problems. Caesar was overzealous in his assessment that the British expedition might achieve its primary goal within the short time remaining that summer. Moreover, he complicated the situation by proceeding without reliable intelligence and his cavalry. Additionally, he conceals many of his motives. Ultimately, the British expedition is a marquee example of "creative recording." However, the focus should not be, on whether Caesar falsified his accounts on occasion, but on what a general of Caesar's stature had to gain from such an inaccurate account of events?

The Efficacy of *Commentarii*:

To understand accurately the social gains Caesar made through the *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, we must first consider his political goals. Second, we must put Caesar's *Commentarii* into perspective by demonstrating the political value of the British account and of the work as a whole. Ultimately, it will be clear that Caesar was a calculating, methodical politician, who upon his return from Gaul had become an authoritarian dictator whom history must hold accountable for the fall of the Roman republic.

Caesar had two clear goals at the commencement of his Gallic campaign: the first was to rid himself of his political allies, namely Pompey and Crassus. Although they were valuable, because they made accessible large amounts of political, military, and financial assistance, they also posed an obstacle to Caesar's individual rule. Thus, the campaign in Gaul offered a chance to succeed without their contributions, ultimately leaving Caesar alone as the first man in Rome.

Second, Caesar wanted not merely political power but total rule. He had labored in Rome bureaucratically in 59 as consul, and had found it a hindrance. The legislation he proposed fell on deaf ears, thus compromising the triumvirate. In turn, Caesar was forced to use intimidation to accomplish his goals.[24] However, with sole power, Caesar would offset the inconvenient elements of Rome, while maintaining the control a general of his stature desired.

Caesar at no time let his final goal fall out of sight. Even with his appointment to Gaul, he stayed politically astute and well informed about affairs in Rome. His survival was dependent on his ability to mold the political scene of Rome, keep his name at the forefront, and limit the power of his opponents.[25] This was the point of his *Commentarii*; they offered him an opportunity to be "present in many places at once."[26] Moreover, they gave him an extensive range to maneuver when considering what to record and what to omit. Because Caesar was both the subject and the author of this history, it allowed him a distinct advantage: to utilize a key element of warfare in politics as well, the element of deception.[27] With the crossing to Britain, Caesar had done something no other Roman had accomplished; he had touched a land that was virtually unheard of, and his *Commentarii* allowed him to relay that feat to the Roman people very quickly, because he had set up a very efficient and reliable courier service, enabling him not only to inform the Roman public of his accomplishments, but also to stay informed of Rome's political landscape.[28]

---

[24] Meier, 213.
[25] Meier, 224
[26] Ibid.
[27] Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. T. Cleary (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 1988), 49.
[28] Meier, 224.

The true value of Caesar's *Commentarii* cannot be measured by mere reference to its uses. Through them, Caesar issued his version of the truth both to the masses and the aristocracy. The British landing was a calculated account of Caesar's grandeur as a general and as a Roman citizen. The Britain crossing was a cultural representation of Roman greatness. Additionally, the British expedition "reinforced the existence of Roman culture,"[29] to the Roman people: "to assert the existence of somewhere that is not Roman is to reinforce the existence of Roman culture as a construct. But the distinction only becomes clear when the boundary is crossed."[30] In physical terms, that meant crossing the British channel. This might offer an explanation to Caesar's haste; he may have simply wanted to step on the island, not only to conduct a reconnaissance of the island for a future campaign, but also to demonstrate the superiority of the Roman civilization, to both Britons and Romans alike.

Moreover, it is understandable that Caesar slanted his mistakes; surely he wanted to maintain his credibility back in Rome. But more importantly, he wanted to demonstrate Rome's greatness. Caesar carefully considered his options and opted, like any good general, for the most advantageous.[31] This is why he omits any mention of gold or silver as a motive for action; some might have considered him petty to conquer simply for profit, or treasonous to put Roman solders in harm's way for personal gain. In essence, Caesar employed his *commentarii* as propaganda to persuade readers of his position,[32] thus increasing his political clout.

---

[29] Stewart, 6.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Tzu, 48.
[32] J. P. V. D. Balsdon, "The Veracity of Caesar," *Greece & Rome,* 2nd Ser. 4. (March 1957), 23.

Caesar used the governorship of *Gallia Cisalpina* as the foundation for his future conquests. Every step is justified in his *Commentarii*, and the Roman public would have been eager to hear of his next victory. Many Romans saw Britain as an exotic place, as indicated by Catullus' poem 11.[33] With Caesar's landing in Britain he had touched the end of the world; the Roman public would have marveled at that feat. His *Commentarii* allowed for a justification of his actions, a manipulation of the public, and the ensuring of eternal reverence. Caesar was a very accomplished writer and orator, and he reserved his best written work for the *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, not out of vanity, but because it offered him a large audience and even larger socio-political gains.

Conclusion:

Gaius Julius Caesar was a shrewd statesman who employed his great skills in military matters, writing, and politics to catapult him to the forefront of the Roman political scene. He showed great political promise at an early age. He presented the report of the British landing as a firsthand account (though written in the third person) of the expedition, by the commander of the Roman army. However, as I have shown, in his account he chose to focus only on aspects that offered political gains, rather than submitting an honest account of his failures and true motives. Pragmatically, these omissions were grounded in Caesar's political goals. Ultimately, Caesar employed the *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* magnificently; he projected an inaccurate account to the Roman public, became dictator for life, and was offered the diadem of kingship weeks before his death in 44 B.C.E. In the end, Caesar sealed his own fate. He had become so threatening to Rome that many of his own

[33] Catullus, *Tibullus and Pervigilum Veneris*, trans. F.W. Cornish (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962), 17.

men assisted in his assassination, labeling the greatest general in Roman history a tyrant. In fact, he was just that, a tyrannical, arrogant, sadistic leader bent on total domination, which he did achieve, if only for a short while.[i]

Fig. 1

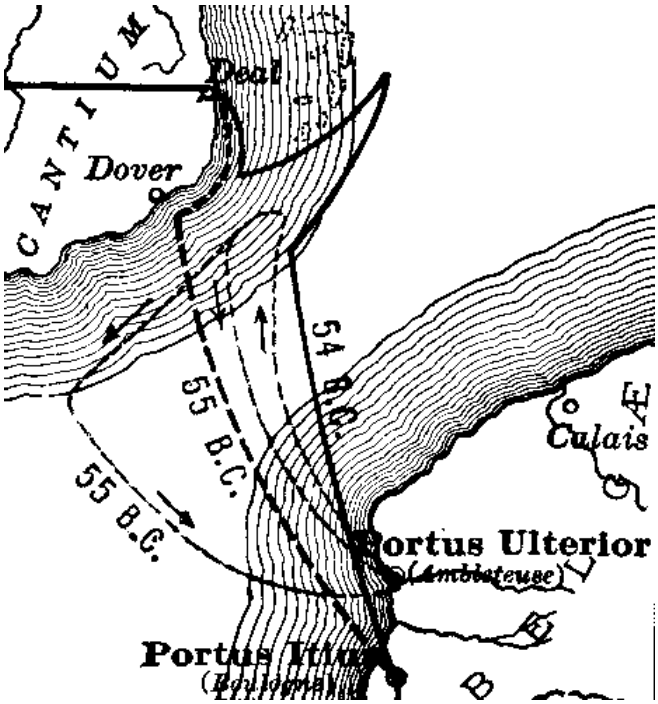

Fig. 2

Bibliography

Primary sources:

Caesar, Gaius Julius. *The Gallic War.* Trans. Carolyn Hammond. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996.

Catullus, Gaius Valerius. *Catullus, Tibullus and Pervigilum Veneris*. Trans. F.W. Cornish. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962.

Cicero, Marcus Tullius. *Letters to His Friends*. Trans. W. Glynn Williams. Vols. 1-3. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959.

Cicero, Marcus Tullius. *Letters of Cicero: A Selection in Translation.* Trans. L.P. Wilkinson. London: Hutchinson, 1966.

Sun Tzu. *The Art of War*. Trans. T. Cleary. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 1988.

Secondary sources:

"The Landings of Caesar in Britain, 55 and 54 BC." *Athena Review 1.1* (1996). Available online at: http://www.athenapub.com/caesar1.htm (24 Nov 2003).

"Caesar's campaigns in Gaul (58-50)." *Athena Review 1.4* (1998). Available online at: http://www.athenapub.com/caesarg1.htm (24 Nov 2003).

Balsdon, J.P.V.D. "The Veracity of Caesar." *Greece & Rome*, 4 (1957): 19-28.

Fuller, J.F.C. *Julius Caesar: Man, Soldier, and Tyrant.* New Brunswick, NJ: Da Capo Press, 1965.

Holmes, Thomas Rice. *Ancient Britain and the Invasions of Julius Caesar*. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1907

Le Glay, Marcel, et al. *A History of Rome.* 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 2001.

Meier, Christian. *Caesar: a Biography*. Trans. David McLintock. New York: MJF Books, 1982.

Shelton, Jo-Ann. *As the Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998.

Stewart, P.C.N. "Inventing Britain: the Roman Creation and Adaptation of an Image." *Britannia 26* (1995): 1-10.

Zvi, Yavetz. "Caesar, Caesarism, and the Historians." *Journal of Contemporary History*. vol. 6, 2 (1971): 184-201

---

[i] A most heartfelt thank you must go out to Dr. James P. Holoka, a man of the highest caliber, the most genuine character, and the utmost dedication. Only through his tutelage was I able to accomplish this work, and for that I am eternally in his debt.