

Conquest, mass violence and ethnic stereotyping: investigating Caesar's actions in the Germanic frontier zone

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Caesar's Gallic conquest and the study of mass violence

The Late Republican to Early Imperial period was one of spectacular territorial expansion into the surrounding 'tribal periphery' of the Roman West. There, the indigenous societies were confronted with state-organised warfare on an unprecedented scale and with a range of new military technologies and strategies. The direct societal impact of conquest on the subjected groups varied greatly. Conquest could strengthen certain polities and stimulate processes of state formation, but it could have disastrous effects on other groups. Here I will investigate Roman warfare in the tribal zone, with a special focus on two topics: the use of extreme mass violence against resistant groups, and the relationship between disproportional use of violence and negative ethnic stereotyping of the 'tribal other'. I hope to show that archaeology can contribute to a wider debate on these topics among historians and anthropologists¹ by assessing the short-term demographic impact of conquest.

Caesar's *Commentarii* on his conquest of Gaul represent a unique document for the study of Rome's imperialist expansion, and one that has occupied many generations of historians and archaeologists: his narrative appears to be an inexhaustible resource for scholarly research and discussions. In the past two decades three developments have given new impetus to the study of his conquest of Gaul:² first, the impact of post-colonial theory and the corresponding critical view of imperialism and militarism;³ second, the development of advanced forms of critical reading of Caesar's narrative, which direct our attention to the work's rôle as an instrument of political communication and manipulation;⁴ third, the availability of new and better archaeological evidence that enables us to contextualise Caesar's narrative and open up new discussions.⁵

1 On anthropological and historical studies of warfare of expanding empires in the 'tribal zone', see R. B. Ferguson and N. L. Whitehead (edd.), *War in the tribal zone. Expanding states and indigenous warfare* (Santa Fe, NM 1992); G. Woolf, *Tales of the barbarians. Ethnography and empire in the Roman West* (Chichester 2011).

2 N. Roymans and M. Fernández-Götz, "Caesar in Gaul: new perspectives on the archaeology of mass violence," in T. Brindle *et al.* (edd.), *TRAC 2014* (Oxford 2015) 70-80.

3 For some recent historical studies on the relationship between colonialism and the use of extreme violence, see D. Walter, *Colonial violence. European empires and the use of force* (New York 2017); B. Madley, *An American genocide. The United States and the California Indian catastrophe* (New Haven, CT 2018).

4 See G. Walser, *Caesar und die Germanen. Studien zur politischen Tendenz römischer Feldzugsberichte* (Historia Einzelschriften 1, 1956); A. Riggsby, *Caesar in Gaul and Rome. War in words* (Austin, TX 2006). H. Schadee, "Caesar's construction of Northern Europe: inquiry, contact and corruption in *De Bello Gallico*," *CQ* 58 (2008) 158-80; A. Johnston, "Nostri and 'The other(s)'," in L. Grillo and C. B. Krebs (edd.), *The Cambridge companion to the writings of Julius Caesar* (Cambridge 2018) 68-80.

5 Cf. the papers in three recent volumes: M. Fernández-Götz and N. Roymans (edd.), *Conflict archaeology: materialities of collective violence from prehistory to late antiquity* (New York 2018);