

Roman attitudes to empire and imperialism: the view from history

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In a letter written to Atticus in mid March 60 B.C., Cicero (*Att.* 1.19.2) flagged up a number of concerns regarding the situation in Gaul:

In public life at the moment, fear of a Gallic war is the big issue. For the Aeduans, our brothers, have recently fought a hard fight and without doubt the Helvetii are up in arms and making excursions into the province. The senate has decreed that the consuls should cast lots for the two Gauls, that levies should take place with no exemptions valid, and that legates with authority should be sent to go to the Gallic communities and to make an effort to prevent them from joining forces with the Helvetii (author's transl.)

The Aeduans held a unique position in relation to Rome, referred to as *fratres consanguineique* (Caes., *BG* 1.33.2), signifying an alliance, which dated back to at least the mid-2nd c. B.C.¹ Although the conflict lay outside Rome's direct control, the receipt of an embassy from their allies regarding the attacks they had endured from German mercenaries (brought in to aid the Sequani and Arverni) gave the senate more than enough reason to propose military action, stemming from what was considered an 'invitation' into Gaul. However, there was also concern over the Helvetii's preparations for migrating across Lake Geneva and the Rhône into the Roman province of Transalpine Gaul.² Caesar's slightly later account of the planned migration prior to 28 March, 58 B.C. (when the Helvetii assembled on their side of the Rhône) stressed both the apparent personal desire for power of Orgetorix, the Helvetian leader (*BG* 1.2-3), and the geographical factors determining their route, which threatened the Roman province (*BG* 1.6).

The senate's debate in 60 B.C. focussed on the stability of the province and the surrounding area. As the embassy sent to Gaul indicates, Rome was primarily concerned with quelling any potential insurrection against its authority. In March, the senate gave no immediate signs of making a direct military strike, but serious preparations were put in place nonetheless. Some two months later the situation in Gaul stabilized — no doubt a source of some relief amongst the senate as a whole —, but Cicero (*Att.* 1.20.5) was quick to point out that the consul Metellus was less than pleased about the resolution: "He wants a triumph, I suppose". The inference is clear: having been assigned one of the two Gauls in March, Metellus was hoping that military action against the Helvetii would provide him with suitable grounds for self-promotion and aggrandizement at home. In this respect he was not alone. So common was the drive in the Late Republic for ostensible recognition in the form of the triumph that the senate was confident that Caesar would not forego his own triumph in order to run for consul in 60 B.C.³ Furthermore, Cicero, who criticized Metellus' desire for military action over stability in the provinces, exerted much effort trying to persuade the senate, through friends and associates, to award him a triumph after

1 Tac., *Ann.* 11.25.1-2. The date of this alliance is unknown although it was certainly in place by 121 B.C. when Cn. Domitius Ahenobarbus campaigned against the Allobroges at Vindalium, in part because they had lain waste to the lands of the Aeduans who were *socii populi Romani*: see Liv., *Per.* 61.

2 The province, referred to by both Cicero and Caesar simply as *provincia* in relation to the rest of Gaul, was formed in 121 B.C. The migration of the Helvetii into the Roman province is outlined by Caesar at *BG* 1.2-6.

3 Suet., *Iul.* 18.2; App., *B.C.* 2.8; Plut., *Caes.* 13.2; Dio Cass. 37.54.1-3.