

REVIEW

A NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF
THE *BELLUM GALLICUM*

James J. O'Donnell, *Julius Caesar: The War for Gaul. A New Translation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. Pp. xlv + 275. Hardback, \$27.95/£22.00. ISBN 978-0-691-17492-1.

Cicero famously described Caesar's *Commentaries* as 'fabulous: bare, straight, and handsome, stripped of rhetorical ornament like an athlete of his clothes' (*Brut.* 262; cf. Introduction, xxxvi). Of the translations available in English, O'Donnell's version of Caesar's *War for Gaul* most deserves the same characterisation, because of its brevity, bareness, and splendour. The volume includes a general introduction of about forty pages, a new translation of the eight books which make up the *Bellum Gallicum* (seven by Caesar and one by Hirtius), a few brief appendices, and a concise index.

The introduction presents the *Bellum Gallicum* both as a masterpiece of literature by a brilliant writer and as a self-serving account of potent aggression and genocide. Indeed, with disturbing lucidity O'Donnell repeatedly invites his readers to wrestle with both of these facets of the *Bellum Gallicum*—its laudable form, which makes it a valuable reading even today, and its deplorable content, which must not be denied, downplayed, or forgotten. 'Books about war often make us sympathize with the wretchedness of the victims. This one forces us to be Romans of the kind its author wanted to be ... I think this is the best bad man's book ever written' (viii). The rest of the introduction explains, among other things, why Caesar was a 'bad man' and why his book is great. O'Donnell's Caesar is an ambitious, brilliant, learned, lucky, self-disciplined, and selfish opportunist, generous with money to advance his reputation, and equally prepared to strike sketchy bargains with demagogues and to keep connections defanged. For O'Donnell, three main traits distinguish him from other world leaders: he was 'amazingly intelligent and amazingly fortunate in his judgments' and had a first-class temperament (xxxii); but 'we must remember then above all that this was still a very bad man' (xxxiii). One wonders if we should not only highlight the shocking hiatus between a great book and its bad author; but also acknowledge the coexistence of contradicting traits within Caesar's personality. Unquestionably, Caesar was ruthless towards his enemies, and his incapability or unwillingness to see

fellow human beings in the thousands of people he slaughtered or enslaved deserves unconditional condemnation; but also, he lived in a bad world, which rewarded politicians and generals like him; he was charismatic and his generosity reached beyond selfish calculations; his vision for the Roman army and empire included a much broader basis of recruitment than the one held by most of his contemporaries. It reached out to lower classes and was open to talented provincials. Equally, his mercy after the Civil War surpassed the amazing intelligence and fortune in his judgements, and the very people he pardoned murdered him. In other words, O'Donnell rightly cautions against enjoying the *Bellum Gallicum* and unconsciously internalising Caesarian ideology; but I would not place the wedge between the man—bad—and the work—good; rather, and perhaps more radically, I would place it within the man himself—spectacularly bad and spectacularly good. In my view, it is even more uncomfortable to contemplate both sets of qualities, especially when acknowledging the good ones does not lead one to overlook, justify, or excuse his war crimes.

The *Bellum Gallicum* is a masterpiece of world literature, but it should not be taken at face value: Caesar's bare style and the choice of a third-person narrator convey a pervasive sense of factuality and objectivity, which invites readers to accept his account without questions. For example, modern readers approach the *Bellum Gallicum* knowing that Caesar's Gaul broadly corresponds to modern-day France; but O'Donnell rightly calls attention to the fact that what Caesar calls Gaul is not what the Romans meant; in fact, 'Gaul for him was what he wanted it to be' (x), and the very fact that we must make an effort to realise that Caesar's Gaul was his own creation is the measure of his success. Similarly, Caesar's seemingly objective narrative conceals some spectacular omissions and proposes 'a very artificial performance' (xxxix): for example, Caesar rarely mentions the drive and outcome of his war campaign—wealth (xxxiv–xxxv), the hardships suffered by his soldiers, and the presence of camp followers, especially slave-traders and prostitutes (xvi–xvii); he allots little space to Roman and foreign gods and religion and to the interconnected effects of war in Gaul and politics in Rome (xxxix and xlii). Thanks to Caesar's brilliant style and selective narrative, the reader 'runs a grave risk of being misled into thinking the work a transparent objective account of a determinate and complete set of historical events surrounding Caesar's time in Gaul' (xlii). The introduction also refreshingly and successfully challenges some stereotypes about the *Bellum Gallicum*: for instance, O'Donnell explains that Caesar's prose is not as straightforward as commonly held; that the various nations of Gauls we meet were not all the same; and that there is much to gain by reading each commentary in the historical context of the specific year it narrates.

To this aim, short introductions to each of the eight commentaries connect each book to the contemporary political situation in Rome and alert readers to some of Caesar's specific aims. O'Donnell convincingly shows that it makes

a big difference to read Book 1 wondering why Caesar was so pressed for money and success in 58; and to approach the description of the bridge Caesar built over the Rhine in Book 4, realising that Caesar did not need one; that both expeditions to Britain were fruitless; and to set the narrative of Book 7 against the context of 52, with its ‘near collapse of government and urban peace at Rome’ (169). These book introductions succeed equally in achieving the declared goals of this new translation: to prevent readers from taking Caesar’s account at face value (xlii); to let us ‘see Caesar the man and politician, not just the general he wanted you to see’ (xxxi); and to present the narrative of each year ‘as a Roman at the end of that year may have heard it’ (xxxviii). In all these respects this new edition and translation are a great achievement.

The translation is crisp, swift, and energetic. Modern languages tend to be more verbose than Latin, and various English translations employ from one-and-a-half to twice as many words as Caesar; O’Donnell’s, however, is 15–40% shorter than other translations (xlii), and if one counts characters instead of words, his ‘translation is actually shorter than Caesar’s Latin’ (xliii n. 24).

To bring out the merits of this translation, we can take a look at two Latin passages and three English translations, which exemplify different ways to grapple both with Caesar’s hypotaxis and parataxis. At 3.8, Caesar introduces the Veneti, whose sudden rebellion triggers further military action:

huius est ciuitatis longe amplissima auctoritas omnis orae maritimae regionum earum, quod et naues habent Veneti plurimas, quibus in Britanniam nauigare consuerunt, et scientia atque usu rerum nauticarum ceteros antecedunt et in magno impetu maris atque aperto paucis portibus interiectis, quos tenent ipsi, omnes fere qui eo mari uti consuerunt habent uectigales. ab his fit initium retinendi Sillii atque Velanii et si quos intercipere potuerunt, quod per eos suos se obsides, quos Crasso dedissent, recuperaturos existimabant.

1. The Veneti are much the most powerful tribe on this coast. They have the largest fleet of ships, in which they traffic with Britain; they excel the other tribes in knowledge and experience of navigation; and as the coast lies exposed to the violence of the open sea and has but few harbours, which the Veneti control, they compel nearly all those who sail those waters to pay toll. They were the first to take action against the Romans by detaining Sillius and Velanius and any others they could catch, hoping by this to recover the hostages they had given to Crassus.

(Handford (1951), revised by Gardner (1982), Penguin, 77).

2. This last-mentioned nation has, for several reasons, by far the most influence in those regions of the maritime nations: the Veneti have a

very great number of ships, with which they regularly sail to Britain; they are far superior to the other nations in nautical know-how and experience; and, because the sea in that area is violently stormy and the coast unprotected, with few harbors far between, which the Veneti themselves control, they are able to exact tolls from nearly all the others who regularly travel on that sea.

The Veneti started the conflict by seizing Sillius and Velanius [and whoever else they could capture,] thinking they could use them to get back the hostages they had given to Crassus.

(Raaflaub, *Landmark Caesar*, 86).

3. This nation was far the most influential on the whole seacoast in the area, for the Veneti have many ships accustomed to sailing to Britain and they excel the others in knowledge and experience of sailing. The sea spreads roughly there, while the Veneti hold the few ports, so almost all who use these waters pay them taxes. They started to detain Silius and Velanius and anyone else they could catch, thinking they could thereby recover hostages they had given Crassus.

(O'Donnell, 69).

In my view, both Raaflaub and O'Donnell improve Handford's translation, but they are rather different. Raaflaub's is more literal, and hence closer to Caesar's Latin, but O'Donnell's shines for its brevity, speed, and vigour, that is, precisely for the qualities that contemporaries used to ascribe to Caesar's prose. A second passage confirms this impression. At the end of Book 7 (7.89), Caesar negotiates with the Gallic council, who hands over Vercingetorix:

postero die Vercingetorix concilio conuocato id bellum se suscepisse non suarum necessitatum, sed communis libertatis causa demonstrat, et quoniam sit fortunae cedendum, ad utramque rem se illis offerre, seu morte sua Romanis satisfacere seu uiuum tradere uelint. mittuntur de his rebus ad Caesarem legati. iubet arma tradi, principes produci. ipse in munitione pro castris consedit: eo duces producuntur. Vercingetorix deditur, arma proiciuntur. reseruatis Aeduis atque Aruernis, si per eos ciuitates recuperare posset, ex reliquis captiuis toti exercitui capita singula praedae nomine distribuit.

1. The day after Vercingetorix addressed an assembly. 'I did not undertake the war', he said, 'for private ends, but in the cause of national liberty. And since I must now accept my fate, I place myself at your disposal. Make amends to the Romans by killing me or surrender me alive as you think best.' A deputation was sent to refer the matter to Caesar, who ordered the arms to be handed over and the tribal chiefs brought out to

him. He seated himself at the fortification in front of his camp, and there the chiefs were brought; Vercingetorix was delivered up, and the arms laid down. Caesar set apart the Aeduan and Arvernian prisoners, in the hope that he could use them to regain the allegiance of their tribes; the rest he distributed as booty to the entire army, allotting one to every man.

(Handford/Gardner, Penguin, 200).

2. On the following day Vercingetorix called a meeting and pointed out that he had not undertaken this war to advance his own interests but to serve the cause of the common freedom. Yet now there was no choice but to yield to Fortune, and he offered himself to his fellow Gauls for whichever action they chose: they could take his life to appease the Romans or hand him over alive.

Envoys were sent to Caesar to discuss this matter. He ordered the Gauls to turn over their weapons and to bring their leaders before him. He took his seat in front of his camp within the fortifications. The leaders were brought to him there. Vercingetorix was surrendered, the weapons were thrown down, Caesar put aside the captives from among the Aedui and Arverni, hoping to use them to restore close ties with these nations; but the rest of the captives he distributed to his army as plunder, one for each soldier.

(Raaflaub, *Landmark Caesar*, 266).

3. Next day, Vercingetorix calls a council to say he had entered the war not out of personal need but for the liberty of all. Forced to yield to fortune, he offers himself to them, either to die to placate the Romans or to be handed over alive. They send legates about this to Caesar. He orders weapons surrendered and leaders handed over. He sits in the fortifications before his camp and there the leaders are handed over. Vercingetorix is surrendered, arms are laid down. Setting aside the Haedui and Arverni (hoping to use them to win over their nations), he gives the captives to his army as slaves, one to each soldier.

(O'Donnell, 218–19).

The evident difference in the translations by Raaflaub and O'Donnell is further highlighted by some editorial choices: Raaflaub's translation in the *Landmark Caesar*, which includes the entire *corpus Caesarianum*, is accompanied by maps, pictures of coins, archaeological sites, visual arts, and other pieces of material evidence; on average, footnotes occupy about one third of each page; a couple of dates per page help the readers to keep track of the chronology; and online essays from an international team of Caesarian scholars elucidate various aspects of Caesar's writings. By contrast, O'Donnell keeps footnotes to

a minimum (about half of the pages have none) and refers his readers to websites where detailed maps can be found but prints only one, which is 'intentionally drawn to approximate the knowledge that a Roman reader might have or have drawn from reading Caesar. It is still much too accurate for its purpose ...' (xliv–v). As seen, however, O'Donnell provides concise and illuminating introductions to each book, and this choice invites readers to see each book as a unit and each unit as a reflection of its specific and quick-changing historical context. In conclusion, O'Donnell's gripping translation and editorial choices certainly achieve his goals: readers do experience Caesar's *War for Gaul* as a great book, but they are also invited to question the morality and the historical accuracy of the narrative they enjoy.

University of Notre Dame

LUCA GRILLO
lgrillo@nd.edu