

REVIEW

A NEW CAESAR GREEN-AND-YELLOW

Christopher B. Krebs, ed., *Caesar: Bellum Gallicum, Book VII*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. xvi + 386. Paperback, £25.99/\$33.99. ISBN 978-1-009-17714-6.

Despite its standing as an enduring pillar of Latin language education and the even more monumental exploits of its author, Julius Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum* has long been spared serious evaluation as a literary text. While a near-countless number of volumes can be found mining the depths of Caesar's narrative for details of late-republic military strategy, siege tactics, and army compositions, only comparatively recently has scholarship begun to appear that considers Caesar and his works in a manner similar to other titans of Latin literature such as Cicero, Livy, and Tacitus.

Christopher B. Krebs' edition of Book VII (*VII*) of the *Bellum Gallicum* for the Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics series seeks to channel the spirit of that historiographical turn. The first commentary on *VII* in over a century, Krebs seeks to improve upon preceding commentaries by Heinrich Meusel, Friedrich Kraner and Wilhelm Dittenberger, and T. Rice Holmes by expanding his edition's evaluation of the *Bellum Gallicum* to also consider and appreciate Julius Caesar as a writer. Krebs declares that his commentary 'attempts a contextualized reading of C.'s work through the eyes of a contemporary Roman reader, who was trained in rhetoric, versed in Greek and Roman literature, and familiar with the same political and cultural conventions and discourses as its author' (2). As a result, Krebs' edition of *VII* features much more consideration of Caesar's style and authorial intent, as well as of his place within the greater canon of Greek and Roman historians. The end product of these editorial decisions is an excellent and timely commentary that will prove eminently useful to scholars and students of the *Bellum Gallicum* for decades to come, albeit with a few minor drawbacks.

In his introduction to the text, Krebs surveys the landscape of Caesarian scholarship over the last several decades, noting in particular the air of scepticism toward the *Bellum Gallicum*'s narrative that has (rightly) prevailed since the 1990s. In keeping with his stated aim of rehabilitating the *Bellum Gallicum*'s image as a nuanced literary composition, Krebs' main criticism of the commentaries that preceded his own—and of much of earlier Caesarian scholarship more generally—is that it was too trusting of Caesar's narrative:

‘one cannot find in them more than a passing remark on the *Bellum Gallicum* as a literary work, which, in effect, misrepresents the text’ (58). Krebs’ endeavour to correct this imbalance is noticeable throughout his edition, and it provides a commentary on perhaps the most fraught of the *Bellum Gallicum*’s books that is refreshingly in step with the scholarship.

The commentary is organised roughly into three distinct sections. The first is a lengthy introduction, which provides both historical context and a survey of scholarship on the *Bellum Gallicum* specifically and Caesar as an author more generally; several pages of maps, schematics of fortifications, and full-colour images of coins are provided at its end. The next section, the actual text of *VII*, follows Wolfgang Herring’s 1987 Teubner edition, versus the generally more popular 1900 Oxford text from Du Pontet. Finally, the third section is a meaty commentary comprising over 200 pages. The introduction is an invaluable asset to those new to Caesarian scholarship or even to scholars looking to expand their knowledge of other subfields—Krebs strikes in this section a fine balance between citing recent works with deep bibliographies and older, more often overlooked material. With regard to the latter category, an emphasis on German scholarship is a particular strength of this edition. The introduction’s survey of Caesar’s stylistic choices, such as word usage, orthography, morphology, and syntax also provides a good sampling of the insights found in the commentary section, which show Krebs in his element and are consistently fascinating and useful in conceiving more clearly of Caesar as a practised and deliberate author with strong intentions for his narrative.

While considering Caesar’s literary influences and his adherence to Greco-Roman rhetorical and literary traditions is both valuable and interesting, it does occasionally tend to draw focus away from the fact that the *Bellum Gallicum* is ostensibly reporting on real historical events. As is the wont of historiographical scholarship, Krebs’ commentary sometimes wanders onto paths that, if followed to their logical ends, would suggest that most of the *Bellum Gallicum*’s text is a politically motivated fabulation aimed primarily at advancing Caesar’s distinctive style of Latin prose as well as emulating the greats of earlier historical writing, such as Thucydides and Polybius. Cited several times in this volume, Wiseman (1979) and Woodman (1988) cast a long shadow.¹ Krebs himself is clear-eyed enough to concede, however, that a historiographical reading will naturally create this sort of dissonance between the consideration of *VII* as a historical source and as a literary work.

In fairness to Krebs, Caesar is an admittedly unique author compared to other Greek and Roman historians: not only was Caesar witness to much of what he wrote about, but his political motivations for writing the *Bellum*

¹ T. P. Wiseman, *Clio’s Cosmetics: Three Studies in Greco-Roman Literature* (Leicester, 1979); A. J. Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography: Four Studies* (Portland, 1988).

Gallicum are apparent to even the most sluggish of imaginations. The scepticism that has so pervaded Caesarian scholarship over the last several decades is thus warranted, but it still should be applied with care, lest the exposing of Caesar's literary artifice become the sole object of study to the exclusion of the *Bellum Gallicum*'s original purpose of reporting on the war in Gaul. Krebs' observations in the historiographical vein, which include scepticism of Caesar's chronology in *VII*, speculation over Caesar's frequent lack of specificity, and questioning of the reality of Vercingetorix's words and deeds, provide a relatively good model of how to strike this balance, and are less redolent of Hamburger Helper than the work of some other scholars of Latin historiography.²

On the whole, Krebs has produced an erudite and impressive work that will serve as a valuable resource to students of the *Bellum Gallicum* new and old for decades to come. Krebs' focus on Caesar's style and on *VII* as a literary work, while not without its drawbacks, is nonetheless a timely advance in the consideration of Caesar as a full-fledged historical author. One hopes that this edition will influence future commentaries on Caesar generally and the *Bellum Gallicum* specifically to favour a similar approach.

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² J. E. Lendon, 'Historians without History: Against Roman Historiography', in A. Feldherr, ed., *Cambridge Companion to the Roman Historians* (Cambridge, 2009) 41–62, esp. 56.