

BELLATOR EQUUS. ROMAN CAVALRY IN THE TIME OF CAESAR: THE CONQUEST OF GAUL

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DOI: 10.2478/amsh-2023-0001

Abstract

The personality of Caius Julius Caesar was one of the most representative for the Late Republic. His political prowess doubled with excellent military abilities (and sometimes recklessness) made him overcome some rather challenging situation, especially during the conquest of Gaul. In this conflict the cavalry played a decisive role but, it also underwent significant changes.

Keywords: Republic; Caesar; cavalry; auxiliaries; Gaul

The Roman citizen cavalry remained in use up to the end of the second century, even though it seemed that its time was up, due to the social and military changes that will define the age of the “Roman revolution.” What is certain is that during the invasion of the Cimbri and Teutoni in 102/101 B.C. the Roman citizen cavalry took part in the military operations. Actually, it seems that they made their exit from history through a glorious defeat at the battle of Athesis (102 B.C.) where the Roman cavalry was driven back the assault of the Cimbri and “panic stricken, the cavalry deserted the consul Catulus and fled to Rome.”¹ It is clear that Maximus refers to a contingent of citizen cavalry. More or less, this is the last evidence of the existence of the citizen cavalry. Only in the years of the Gallic conquest of Caius Julius Caesar the “citizen cavalry” appears again. “Given the Celtic reputation as mounted warrior and of Gaul as a source of horses, it was inevitable that cavalry should play a major role in Caesar’s campaigns there.”² In 58 B.C. Caesar showcased his capacities of improvising, adapting and overcoming: he actually mounted his 10th Legion on the horses of his Gallic allies just because he did not trusted

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¹ Valerius Maximus, *Factorum et dictum memorabilium*, Liber V: “*Apud Athesim flumen impetu Cimbrorum Romani equites pulsi deserto <consule> Catulo urbem pauidi repeterent*” <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/valmax5.html> (accessed 2023.10.17.).

² Philip Snidell, *Warhorse. Cavalry in ancient warfare*, London, Continuum, 2006, p. 220.

the local cavalry.³ But as it will be seen in the following, it was an exception, from now on “any reference to specific types of cavalry in Roman armies is a reference to foreign auxiliaries.”⁴ Thus, in the Gallic campaign Caesar’s cavalry was formed mainly from Celtic allies, who “fought in their native equipment in units led by their own chieftains, although large groupings would be put under a Roman officer.”⁵ The good part was that in this campaign the cavalry of both sides used almost identical weapons and equipment (except for the 10th Legion), so during the confrontations not only the sheer numbers counted but, mostly the tactical skills and leadership. Nevertheless, during the Gallic campaigns, the cavalry had mixed results, with victories and setbacks due mostly to the lack of discipline and “fragile morale”⁶ of the Celtic cavalry (in a confrontation with the Helvetii, in one occasion 4000 Celtic cavalrymen were forced to run by a counterattack of only 500 Helvetian horsemen). After finally routing out the Helvetii, in 57 BC the conflict with the confederation of the Belgic tribes began. Having learned from the experience of the previous year, Caesar used his cavalry more cautiously by sending small units to test the enemy. As he described in his *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, he soon found out that his cavalry is evenly matched with those of the Belgae. Thus, by using a combined force of archers, slingers and cavalry he managed to hinder several flanking manoeuvres of the Belgae, causing them a high number of casualties. The result was the expected one: the army of the Belgic confederation fell apart. Even now Caesar was cautious: first he sent out again small units “to assess the situation and only then ordered the rest of his cavalry to harass the rear of the straggling columns.”⁷ The cavalry managed to perform its main tactical purpose: to harass and destroy a disorganised army, putting a continuous pressure first on the rear-guard and, later, to pursue the rest of the fleeing army⁸ Caesar

³ C. Iulii Caesaris, *Comentariorum de Bello Gallico*, I, 42.6 “6 Caesar, quod neque conloquium interposita causa tolli volebat neque salutem suam Gallorum equitatu committere audebat, commodissimum esse statuit omnibus equis Gallis equitibus detractis eo legionarios milites legionis X., cui quam maxime confidebat, imponere, ut praesidium quam amicissimum, si quid opus facto esset, haberet. 7 Quod cum fieret, non inridicule quidam ex militibus X. legionis dixit: plus, quam pollicitus esset Caesarem facere; pollicitum se in cohortis praetoriae loco X. legionem habiturum ad equum rescribere”.

<https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/caesar/gall1.shtml#42> (accessed 2023. 10.17).

⁴ Jeremiah McCall, *The Cavalry of the Roman Republic*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 101.

⁵ Snidell, *op.cit.*, p. 220.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 221.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 222.

⁸ C. Iulii Caesaris, *Comentariorum de Bello Gallico*, II, 11.4-6 *Hi novissimos adorti et multa milia passuum persecuti magnam multitudinem eorum fugientium conciderunt, cum ab extremo agmine, ad quos ventum erat, consisterent fortiterque impetum*

managed to defeat his enemies one by one taking advantage of their lack of unity. The last major test was his conflict with the Nervii, “who lived in particularly densely wooded country and so made less use of cavalry than most Gaul’s.”⁹ The Nervii ambushed the Romans and after routing out their cavalry, which had no place to manoeuvre, attacked the Roman infantry. The battle could turn into a disaster for the Romans, but Caesar (who actually was to blame for the situation) “snatched a shield and made his way to the front of the line. He ordered the troops there to open up their formation so that they could use their weapons effectively. His presence and his orders partially restored the situation and checked the Nervii’s progress.”¹⁰ Finally, the Tenth Legion (Caesar’s favourites) and the cavalry, which managed to quickly reorganize, defeated the last pockets of resistance.¹¹ Later, Caesar used his cavalry independently as a quick reaction force in case of rebellions usually against tribes which fought in the same manner.

A much greater challenge for the Caesarian cavalry represented the Britons: in 55 BC Caesar made his first raid in Britain but, practically he had no cavalry, because of the stormy weather which forced the transport ships to turn back. Nevertheless, Caesar forced the landing even though his forces were seriously impeded by the British cavalry and chariots. Both used “hit and run” tactics throwing volleys of javelins in the landing Roman infantry. “Caesar ordered his shallower warships to run themselves aground on the beach on the right flank, the looming ships apparently frightening the Britons, or more probably their horses. The British were driven back some way with a barrage from the catapults, clingers and archers on the ships’ deck and the legionaries reluctantly resumed their attempt to land.”¹² The lack of cavalry on the Roman side caused them great disadvantage, they not being able to exploit their initial successes. That is why in the following year, Caesar gathered “the cavalry of the

*nostrorum militum sustinerent, 5 priores, quod abesse a periculo viderentur neque ulla necessitate neque imperio continerentur, exaudito clamore perturbatis ordinibus omnes in fuga sibi praesidium ponerent.*⁶ *Ita sine ullo periculo tantam eorum multitudinem nostri interfecerunt quantum fuit diei spatium; sub occasum solis sequi destiterunt seque in castra, ut erat imperatum, receperunt.*
<https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/caesar/gall2.shtml#11> (accessed 2023. 10.25).

⁹ Snidell, *op.cit.*, p. 222.

¹⁰ Michael M. Sage, *The army of the Roman Republic. From the Regal period to the army of Julius Caesar*, Yorkshire, Pen&Sword Military, 2018, p. 346.

¹¹ C. Iulii Caesaris, *Comentariorum de Bello Gallico*, II, 27, 2 *equites vero, ut turpitudinem fugae virtute deleant, omnibus in locis pugnae se legionariis militibus praeferrent.* <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/caesar/gall2.shtml#27> (accessed 2023.10. 29).

¹² Snidell, *op.cit.*, p. 224.

whole of Gaul, four thousand in number.”¹³ Only now Caesar managed the counter the attacks of the British cavalry in an effective manner (even if the chariots continued to represent a tactical challenge). Caesar wrote about the British cavalry: “their tactics were such that de danger was exactly the same for pursuer and pursued. A further difficulty was that they never fought in very close order, but in very open formations and had reserves posted here and there; in this way the various groups covered one another’s retreat and fresh troops replaced those who were tired.”¹⁴ Even with this flexible organization, the Britons could not withstand the combined force of the Roman legions and the auxiliary cavalry so after a series of battles and guerrilla type encounters the former surrendered.

The peace was short lived: in 52 BC the great Gallic rebellion broke out. Caesar’s cavalry consisted exclusively from Gallic and Germanic auxiliaries. The later proved to be a real shock-cavalry, in the siege of Noviodunum, where they obliterated a much larger Gallic cavalry force. The Germanic cavalry represented a tactical reserve, used in an “decisive moment (...). They must have been the kind of men Caesar’s own army feared (...). Perhaps they attacked with a risky full gallop. Were they regular troops of the line or guard? Caesar, saying that he had them “with him”, marks them as his escort, and keeping them behind the battle line shows they were reserve. As an escort and battlefield reserve, Caesar’s German horsemen clearly were his guard. The history of the Roman emperors’ horse guard thus begins at Noviodunum in Gaul in 52 BC.”¹⁵ Vercingetorix assured his allies that the Celtic cavalry will play a decisive role in wining against the Romans “they would just make one concerted attack on the Roman army as it marched encumbered with a large baggage train.”¹⁶ But things did not end well for Vecingetorix: even if the conducted enraged attacks on the Roman columns (on the front and on the flanks), Caesar outmanoeuvred him by dividing his cavalry in three and also sent infantry units in support. This tactic hindered further pursuit and “the hard pressed unit could then rally behind the infantry before returning to the fray. It was the German cavalry,

¹³ C. Iulii Caesaris, *Comentariorum de Bello Gallico*, V. 5.3 *Eodem equitatus totius Galliae convenit, numero milium quattuor, principesque ex omnibus civitatibus*; <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/caesar/gall5.shtml#1> (accessed 2023.10. 29).

¹⁴ C. Iulii Caesaris, *Comentariorum de Bello Gallico*, V, 16, 3,4 *Equestris autem proeli ratio et cedentibus et insequentibus par atque idem periculum inferebat. Accedebat huc ut numquam conferti sed rari magnisque intervallis proeliarentur stationesque dispositas haberent, atque alios alii deinceps exciperent, integrique et recentes defetigatis succederent.* <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/caesar/gall5.shtml#1> (accessed 2023.10. 29).

¹⁵ Michael P. Speidel, *Riding for Caesar. The Roman Emperors’ Horse Guards*, London, B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1994, p. 12.

¹⁶ Snidell, *op.cit.*, p. 233.

possibly with their own light infantry (...) who made the breakthrough.”¹⁷ The final act of the rebellion was played at Alesia, where as it is well known, the Roman siege was at its turn besieged by a large relieving force. The battle for Alesia was a desperate one for both sides: even Caesar describing these decisive hours wrote: “the action was taking place in full view, so no gallant exploit and no fact of cowardice could pass unnoticed, the thirst for glory and the fear of disgrace was an incentive for both sides.”¹⁸ The last battle was the most desperate: the relieving force attacked at midnight, after filling the Roman ditches and “pressing on to attempt to scale the palisades. Alerted by shouting and trumpet calls, Vercingetorix and his men attacked simultaneously from the inside. This first assault failed after desperate fighting and was called off at dawn, but another the following afternoon eventually succeeded in driving the Roman defenders back from the wall and breaking it down.”¹⁹ Caesar made a decisive, and bold, action by bringing four cohorts of infantry and ordering the cavalry to exit “by a section not currently under attack and riding round the outside to take the attackers in the rear.”²⁰ Once again, the situation was saved by the bold actions of Caesar and his, mostly Germanic, cavalry. The flanking manoeuvre took the Celts by surprise and next day Vercingetorix surrendered. The conquest of Gaul emphasised a few important aspects: firstly, the siege of Alesia showed that under a capable leader, the cavalry can be a decisive force in winning a war;²¹ secondarily, the Celtic and German auxiliaries developed as a corps of aggressive and experienced veterans earning an excellent reputation in the following conflicts. Actually, from the time of Caesar “any reference to specific types of cavalry in Roman armies is a reference to foreign auxiliaries.”²²

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 234.

¹⁸ C. Iulii Caesaris, *Comentariorum de Bello Gallico* VII, 80, 5, *Quod in conspectu omnium res gerebatur neque recte ac turpiter factum celari poterat, utrosque et laudis cupiditas et timor ignominiae ad virtutem excitabant.*
<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0001%3Abook%3D7%3Achapter%3D80>

¹⁹ Snidell, *op.cit.*, p. 236.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 236.

²¹ The ability of a leader is well emphasised by the fact that in the meantime, more precisely in 53 BC, at Carrhae, the Romans led by Crassus suffered a crushing defeat by the Parthians. Cf. Snidell, *op.cit.*, pp. 237-242.

²² McCall, *op.cit.*, p. 101.