From Enemies to Citizens: The Relationship of the Romans and Gauls From the Fourth to First Centuries BC

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July 17, 390 BC. The city of Rome was on fire. Having just annihilated a Roman army, a horde of Gauls led by their chieftain Brennus descended upon the Roman people with intent on looting and slaughter. The incident would leave a profound mark on the Roman psyche, forever cementing in the population an anxious need for forward defenses far from Rome itself. This policy paid off, as the city was not sacked again for another eight hundred years. This was in 410 AD, when Alaric, king of the Visigoths, ravaged a much reduced and no longer administratively important Rome.[1] Nevertheless, it would be hard for Romans at the time to imagine that their descendants would work alongside those of their invaders as allies and, eventually, fellow citizens.

The intent of this paper is to expand upon the debate concerning the intentions behind Roman conquests, which has mainly been confined to the Hellenistic world, to the Celtic one, starting with those who lived in what is now France and Northern Italy, a folk

1 This refers to the system used to designate years as part of our Gregorian Calendar system. BC stands for "Before Christ" while AD means "Anno Domini."

collectively referred to as the Gauls.[2] The reason for choosing the Celts over other groups is due to their similarity to the Greeks in the context of Roman conquest. The Celts were also widely distributed geographically, shared a common culture, and maintained constant contact with the greater Mediterranean world. Further, like the Hellenistic powers, they too were ultimately absorbed into the greater milieu of Late Roman culture. The Gauls were selected, meanwhile, due to their high level of documentation in Roman sources: the Gauls and their Cisalpine cousins were a constant concern for the Romans from the early history of the Republic to the height of the Julio-Claudian dynasty during the Empire. This examination will show that the Romans did not intentionally conquer the Gauls but were prompted to by a variety of historical circumstances such as the Punic Wars and Germano-Celtic migrations. Included in this discussion will also be the role of Roman cultural assimilation in the conquest.

The word Celt comes from the Greek word *Keltoi*, which was used nearly 2,500 years ago when the Greeks first came into widespread contact with that people.[3] Said people consisted of several interrelated groups who lived in what is now France, Northern Italy, Spain, Portugal, Central Turkey, and the British Isles (Figure 1). The languages these groups spoke was itself a branch of Proto-Indo-European, which had its origins around the Black Sea in 4,000 BC. Due to waves of migration, most of Europe was speaking Proto-Indo-European derived languages by 2,000 BC. Nevertheless, it is not until 1,200 BC that archeologists can clearly identify the Celts, specifically through the widespread culture group known as the Hallstatt Celts.[4]

Unlike many of their Indo-European peers, the Celts had

2 In terms of the debate, William V. Harris argues that the Romans were highly militaristic and sought to conquer the Hellenistic world. Erich S. Gruen suggests that the conquest was essentially forced on the Romans due to Hellenistic politics. Arthur M. Eckstein, while applying realist political theory to the Mediterranean states of Classical Antiquity, declares that the militarism and imperialistic ambitions of the Roman state were unexceptional when compared to its neighbors. William V. Harris, *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome, 327 - 70 BC* (Oxford University Press, 1979), 1-4; Erich S. Gruen, *The Hellenistic World and the Coming of Rome* (University of California Press, 1984), 721-29; Arthur M. Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome* (University of California Press, 2006), 237, 245.

3 The etymology of the term is unclear.

4 John Haywood, *The Celts: Bronze Age to New Age* (Routledge, 2014), 5-18; Bernhard Maier, *The Celts: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 13-31; H. D. Rankin, *Celts and the Classical World* (Routledge, 1996), 1-33.

a continued history of migration well into Classical Antiquity (800 BC to 476 AD), which would bring them into conflict with many of the more established cultures in and around the Mediterranean such as the Greeks and Romans. The earliest identified Celtic migration during this period was that of the Gauls into Northern Italy, more specifically the area south of the Alps surrounding the Po River Valley. Starting in the late seventh century BC and continuing into the fourth, these Cisalpine Gauls gradually began to grind out the existing Etruscan city-states in the area before pushing into Central Italy itself. Greco-Roman authors such as Livy cite the main motivation of the Gauls as the "burden of overpopulation" which made their government "almost impossible."[5] Regardless, the threat of Gallic conquest was ever present in Italian interstate politics, with Rome itself being sacked by them in 390 BC. Other Celtic groups would also come into contact with the Greco-Roman during this period, with the most famous being the Galatians. During the third century BC, they would press into Illyria, Thrace, Macedon, Anatolia, and Mainland Greece itself, reaching all the way to Delphi (where the famous oracle was located) in 279 BC.[6]

The Roman conquest of the Celts and Gauls was a piecemeal affair that spanned roughly four centuries beginning in the late fourth century BC. Armed with new weapons and tactics, the so-called "Manipular System" made quick work of the Cisalpine Gauls.[7] The Romans completed the conquest of the Cisalpine Gauls by the early second century BC, with another century of relative instability and rebellion afterward. The Second Punic War would also draw the Romans into direct conflict with Carthage's Celtic allies, the Celtiberians, starting in the third century BC. Rome's push into Gaul proper began in the late second century BC starting with the Gallic coastline facing the Atlantic. This was accelerated through growing instability in the region as the Gallic tribes in the area began to feel squeezed by Germanic tribes to the North and East such as the Cimbri and

5 Titus Livius, *The History of Rome*, trans. A. M. D. Spillan (Project Gutenberg, 2006), 5.34.
6 Haywood, *The Celts,* 19-32; Maier, *The Celts,* 47-65, 99-116; Rankin, *Celts and the Classical World*, 188-207.
7 The Manipular System used the maniple as its basic unit, which was divided into four distinct groups of soldiers known as the *velites*, *hastati*, *principes*, and *triarii*. It was adopted by the Romans during the Second Samnite War (326 to 304 BC) and replaced their prior system, which was based on Greek-style phalanxes manned by *hoplites*.

Teutones. The ongoing conflicts between the two groups drove the Romans, primarily under Julius Caesar, to conquer much of Gaul during the first century BC. His conquest ended with the Belgae in Northwestern Gaul in 56 BC. Rebellions would continue for a time afterward, the most notable and largest being led by Vercingetorix in 52 BC. The last Celtic center to fall to Roman rule was that of Britain. Despite Caesar's expedition to Britain in 55 BC, the conquest did not begin until 43 AD under the Emperor Claudius.[8]

Recent historiography on the Roman conquest of Celtic centers such as Gaul, Spain, and Northern Italy can be roughly divided into two types: those that focus on Rome and those that focus on the Celts.[9] There has also been a growing desire to explore the social and economic processes behind the Latinization or Romanization of the Western Roman Empire, an effort that has been informed by a plethora of archeological and linguistic studies.[10] The study of foreign peoples participating in the city of Rome itself is relatively rare.[11]

When trying to apply Arthur M. Eckstein's interpretation of realist interstate theory to Roman conflicts with the Gauls, it is important to not only look at Gallic capability with respect to the Romans but also Roman perception of them. This is because of the characteristics of the interstate relations during this period: most

8 Haywood, *The Celts*, 49-83.

9 Nathan Stewart Rosenstein, *Rome and the Mediterranean 290 to 146 BC: The Imperial Republic* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 71-118, 212, 241; Haywood, *Celts*, 1-17, 84-96. Maier, *Celts*, 117-133.

10 Alex Mullen, "Exploring Life and Languages in the Roman Western Provinces: Methods, Materials, and Mindsets," in *Latinization, Local Languages, and Literacies in the Roman West*, eds. Alex Mullen and Anna Willi (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1-42; Alex Mullen, "Social Dimensions of Latinization," in *Social Factors in the Latinization of the Roman West*, ed. Alex Mullen (Oxford University Press, 2023), 1-33. Nicholas Purcell, "The Creation of Provincial Landscape: The Roman Impact on Cisalpine Gaul," in *The Early Roman Empire in the West*, eds. T. F. Blagg and Martin Millett (Oxbow Books, 2002), 7-23; Frans Theuws, "Grave goods, ethnicity, and the rhetoric of burial rites in Late Antique Northern Gaul," in *Ethnic Constructs in Antiquity: The Role of Power and Tradition*, eds. Ton Derks and Nico Roymans (Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 283-315; Alex Mullen, *Southern Gaul and the Mediterranean: Multilingualism and Multiple Identities in the Iron Age and Roman Periods* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 264-99; Benjamin P. Luley, *Continuity and Rupture in Roman Mediterranean Gaul: An Archaeology of Colonial Transformations at Ancient Lattara* (Oxbow Books, 2020), 1-29, 49-79.

11 David Noy, *Foreigners at Rome: Citizens and Strangers* (The Classical Press of Wales, 2000), 205-212.

states had little to no understanding of their neighbor's capabilities and intentions except in a very rough abstract. The former was largely due to the fact that ancient military forces could be used for both offensive and defensive actions. The latter, meanwhile, is described by Eckstein as a result of "primitive diplomacy," where ancient states would make largely performative demands of each other not aimed at deescalating conflicts but instead pleasing their own internal factions.[12] The result of both was a heightened condition of paranoia amongst the ancient states of the Mediterranean, which is reflected in the behavior of the Roman state towards the Gauls and their cultural perceptions of them as reflected through source descriptions detailed in this article. Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to say the Gauls did not pose a real threat to the Romans, especially during the period of the Early Republic. This threat, both real and perceived, will be explored in the section below.

To a modern observer, it may seem preposterous to call the Gauls "warlike" in comparison to the Romans. To the latter, however, this was not a question but simply fact. In order to understand why that perception existed, one must first put Gallic expansion in the context of Roman expansion. The earliest Roman encounter with the Gauls was at the Etruscan city of Clusium in 391 BC. There, they attempted to dissuade this unknown group of people from blatantly seizing the land of the city. Though the Romans had never fought against the Gauls previously, they had reason to fear Gallic expansion: the Gauls had been slowly displacing the Etruscan city-states in and around the Po Valley in Northern Italy since the fifth century BC (Figure 2). This weakening, in turn, had enabled the rise of Rome as an independent city-state whereas it had previously been dominated by its Etruscan neighbors. Even with this grave concern, the story goes that the Roman ambassadors foolishly provoked the Gauls attacking Clusium by joining the city's defenders in battle. This led to the Gallic invasion of 390 BC which would forever shape Roman perception of the Gauls and their Celtic cousins.[13]

12 Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy*, 58-59, 65, 98-99, 121.
13 Livius, *The History of Rome*, 5.35-5.36. Rankin, *Celts and the Classical World*, 110.



Figure 2: Map of the Gallic presence in Northern Italy during the fourth and third centuries BC. Nancy Todd, Map of Cisalpine Gaul, SVG, Wikipedia, July 17, 2019, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gallia_Cisalpina-en.svg.

The aforementioned invasion was central in cementing the Roman perception of the Gauls as an existential threat, at least during the Early Roman Republic. It began with the Gauls under Brennus ending their conflict with Clusium in 390 BC and quickly marching towards Rome. On their way there, they slaughtered a Roman army near the Allia river, leaving the city undefended. Livy describes Rome as gripped with mass panic, causing the population to variously flee with everything they could carry, resigning themselves to death (as many of the elderly did), or assisting with the evacuation of their sacred priesthoods and relics. When the Gauls arrived, they slaughtered everyone who had not fled, with the exception of a small band of survivors in the city's citadel and set fire to the city after thoroughly looting it. The Romans eventually drove off the Gauls and hastily rebuilt the city. Nevertheless, the damage was done: much of Rome's early records were destroyed and Roman prestige was gravely damaged. The latter is apparent in the fact that it took them roughly thirty years to reestablish the hegemony they had previously held over their Latin neighbors. Further, they suffered continuing conflicts with the Gallic tribes in Northern and Central Italy until 331 BC when they

concluded a peace treaty with them, after which the situation stabilized for roughly forty-five years.[14]

Besides serving as a direct existential threat to the Early Roman Republic, Rome's Gallic neighbors acted as an indirect threat by joining forces with Rome's enemies whenever the opportunity arose. One of the earliest examples of this was when the Cisalpine Gauls joined a massive anti-Roman coalition during the Third Samnite War (298-290 BC). Said coalition included not only the Gauls and Samnites but also other Italic peoples such as the Etruscans and Umbrians. Another example of this was when a new wave of Gauls, the Gaesti, invaded Italy from across the Alps in the 220s. They were joined by tribes that had already settled in the area such as the Boii and Insubres. The Roman response was to accelerate their colonization of Northern Italy by founding new military colonies and granting increased rights to those that already existed.[15] The last major instance of Gallic hostility inside Italy occurred during the Second Punic War (218-201 BC), when a great many tribes aided the invading Carthaginian general Hannibal in his campaign against Rome inside Italy. By this point, Gallic enthusiasm about conflict with Rome was at its lowest intensity. This can be seen in how many tribes were divided in their support for Hannibal, preferring instead the stability of Roman hegemony versus the demands of supporting the Carthaginian army and the associated hardships of fighting a protracted war against Rome.[16]

As mentioned before, when trying to understand the interactions between the Roman state and its Gallic neighbors, it is not just concrete actions that are important but also cultural perceptions. The most striking case of these impressions can be seen in Roman historians' obsession with describing scenes of single combat between Roman and Gallic "champions." These include such scenes as when the Roman ambassadors dueled Gallic champions at Clusium in 391 BC, when Titus Manlius answered the challenge of a Gallic chieftain and slew him therefore earning the title "Torquatus"[17] in 361 BC, and in 346 BC when a Tribune by the name of Valerius, having received per-

14 Livius, *The History of Rome*, 5.35-5.36; Polybius, *The Histories of Polybius*, trans. F. Hultsch, ed. Evelyn S. Shuckburgh (Macmillan and Co: 1889), 2.18.
15 Polybius, *Histories*, 2.20-2.28.
16 Livy, *The War With Hannibal: Books XXI–XXX of The History of Rome from its Foundation*, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt, ed. Betty Radice (Penguin Books: 1965), 21.52, 22.1-22.2.
17 This is a reference to the torques commonly worn by Gallic warriors.

mission from the acting consuls to answer a Gallic challenge, killed another Gallic chieftain. What all these separate incidents have in common is their depiction of the Gauls as both physically large and aggressive. The former is important because it shows that Romans saw themselves as outmatched by their Gallic opponents, instead having to rely upon either excessive bravery such as at Clusium, skill and intelligence like with "Torquatus," or literal divine intervention such as what Valerius received in the form of a crow perching on his head before his duel, which was taken to be a sign by the Romans that the Gallic gods had abandoned their people in the upcoming struggle. Gallic aggression, meanwhile, was equally important and can be observed in the fact that it was never the Romans who initiated these duels. Indeed, most descriptions show the Romans as being quite hesitant to answer them, both individually and collectively. Further, as opposed to the Gauls, the Romans did not prepare their champions with warsongs or the "silly brandishing of weapons."[18]

The Roman perception of contrast between themselves and the Gauls in terms of aggressiveness and self-centeredness can also be seen in their concept of a "just war." A summary of this idea is shown in the *Life of Numa* by Plutarch, which discusses the establishment of the priestly office of the Fetiales, who are tasked with seeking peaceful reconciliation with the enemies of Rome in any way possible. Indeed, it is a striking feature of the Roman political system that the approval of the Fetiales was required before any war could be divinely sanctioned and thus legally declared.[19] The Gauls, on the other hand, are shown as not needing much reason at all to declare war on others other than a desire for land, loot, and glory, regardless of the "rights" of their victims. This first is apparent at Clusium where the Romans tried to dissuade the Cisalpine Gauls from seizing land from the men of Clusium. When the Roman ambassadors asked the invaders by what right did they take the land of strangers, they responded that they "carried their right in their weapons and that all things belonged to the brave."[20] The early portrayal of the Gauls as opportunists who did not care one bit about agreements or justifications is also apparent in the Roman description of the Gaesti's inva-

18 Livius, *The History of Rome*, 5.35, 7.10, 7.25.
19 Plutarch, *Life of Numa* in *Plutarch's Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, 12.3-12.7.
20 Livius, *The History of Rome*, 5.35.

sion during the 220s. Said tribe's primary motivation is described as a desire for all the loot that could be found in the city of Rome. This, of course, was prompted by the actions of tribes such as the Boii and Insubres, who told their kin that the defenses of the city were weak and the Romans militarily incapable.[21] Rome's Gallic enemies are also portrayed as unwilling to engage in warfare that did not provide an immediate gain or promised swift retribution from the Romans. Hannibal, for example, was sorely disappointed by his Gallic allies during his invasion of Italy: they balked at fighting in or supporting his protracted campaign against Rome and its allies, especially when said fighting would, by necessity, extend to their own territories.[22]

Looking at the above, it would be easy to see how and why the Romans thought the Gauls were a military threat. It must also be noted, however, that they also saw them as a potentially destabilizing force in the regional politics Rome took part in. This is most apparent during the Gallic conflict in Italy, when migrating groups of Gauls gradually displaced what had been the northernmost extent of Etruscan territory around the Po river. Indeed, the oft-mentioned city of Clusium was Etruscan. The problem would continue in Northern Italy into the second century BC, with a large group made up of thousands of Gauls crossing the Carnic Alps in 186 BC in order to try to peacefully settle in Northern Italy.[23] The main issue, however, which would drive the Romans to conquer much of Gaul was the migration of Northern Gallic tribes such as the Helvetii into areas they considered under their influence such as the Roman provinces in Southern Gaul, which had been conquered by the late second century BC. What prompted this mass migration was the invasion of Gaul by a non-Celtic group, the Germans. Even as their lands were being invaded, some of the Gallic tribes took the opportunity to ally with the invading Germans against their Roman overlords. Nevertheless, continuing pressure from the Germans eventually led tribes such as the Helvetii to choose forceful immigration into or through Roman territory rather than continue to resist. This did not work, and the

21 Polybius, *Histories*, 2.22.
22 Livy, *The War With Hannibal*, 21.52, 22.1-22.2.
23 Livius, *The History of Rome*, 5.35. Livy, *The War With Hannibal*, 39.2.

Gauls were forced to return to their lands.[24]

Eventually, the Romans and Gauls would become one people through the latter adopting the Roman way of life. The assimilation or "Romanization" of the Gauls is apparent through two strands of evidence: written contemporary sources and archeological and linguistic modern ones. For the former, the best source is Julius Caesar's aptly named *Gallic Wars*, which describes the wars he prosecuted against the Gauls in France from 58 BC to 50 BC. In it, there is perhaps the first indication of a growing understanding between Gallic and Roman elites. This is particularly apparent when it comes to the individual known as Divitiacus, who was a leader of the Aedui. That tribe had long been allies of the Romans and their politics had essentially become intertwined. This can be seen in how Caesar intervenes in the censure of Divitiacus's brother, Dumnorix, as a personal favor to the former, who is described as a close friend. Indeed, the importance of the Aedui to the Romans is highlighted by Caesar's description of the geopolitics of the region: the Aedui were the head of one of two major Gallic coalitions, with the other led by the Gallic tribe most favorable to the invading Germans, the Arverni. Indeed, Gallic nobles like Divitiacus acted as key informants for the Roman Senate on the developing situation within Gaul at the time, going so far as to declare that, unless the Romans intervened in the conflict, the Aedui-led coalition would be forced to flee their territory. It is at this point that Caesar, after deciding to intervene more strongly, began to stylize the pro-Roman Gauls as Roman-like, describing them as having their own senate of "brethren." Moreover, he repeatedly emphasizes their relatively civilized and friendly nature, at least when compared to the arrogance of the anti-Roman Gauls and the supposed savagery of their German allies.[25]

Caesar's account is also useful as evidence for the softening depiction of Gallic culture, as shown by its description of their priests, the so-called druids. These figures are shown as remarkably Roman-like in their duties and habits as they engaged in years of professional priestly training, conducted private and public sacrifices, learned a number of sacred secrets including specific verses which

24 Julius Caesar, *The Gallic Wars*, trans W. A. Macdevitt (Start Publishing LLC, 2012), 1.1-1.7, 1.28.

25 Caesar, *The Gallic Wars*, 1.19-1.20, 1.31-1.33.

are not to be committed to writing, adjudicated legal disputes, and decided certain public punishments and awards. Further, the druids had an organized hierarchy decided by fixed elections at certain sacred locations and wide-ranging authority between the Gallic tribes. Indeed, Caesar describes them as almost philosopher-priests who contemplate the nature of the soul, "extent of the earth," and the motion of the stars. Nevertheless, the above should not be taken to mean that Caesar is suggesting that the Gauls are the equals of the Romans. For example, while they follow roughly the same Gods as the Romans, particularly Mercury, they are "extremely devoted to superstitious rites." The most egregious tendency in that regard, according to Caesar, is their habit of offering human sacrifice to the Gods when their nations are under extreme duress such as during major pestilences. Then again, this may have not been a completely foreign concept to the Romans given their own practice of "devotio," whereby a Roman commander would offer themself up as a sacrifice to the Gods to obtain victory in an upcoming battle.[26]

In terms of archeology, there are numerous case studies on the transition that Gallic regions underwent after being conquered by the Romans. Perhaps the most interesting is the one done on the ancient settlement of Lattara in Southern Gaul by Benjamin P. Luley. In it, he details how this Iron Age town "continued to be an important settlement in the region and a center of trade with the Mediterranean world" until the third century AD when it was abandoned. This period was marked by a massive increase of the consumption of Roman material culture by local elites; the construction of large estates by the wealthier Gauls, termed "villae"; the widescale demolition of Gallic "traditional aggregated blocks of houses" and their replacement with Roman-style "courtyard houses"; the introduction of new non-domestic civic architecture such as ritual spaces, monumental architecture, and drainage and sewage networks; and the connection of the town to a large series of external artisan workshops. Luley argues that these significant changes are proof that Gallic society was radically transformed by the Roman conquest. His most prominent example is how Gallic households embraced the Roman domestic hierarchy known as "Domus," which was stricter than what had previously ex-

26 Caesar, *The Gallic Wars*, 6.13-6.14, 6.16-6.17; Livius, *The History of Rome*, 8.9.

isted in the region.[27]

As with archeology, there is a great deal of ongoing scholarship on the linguistic aspect of the Romanization of the Gauls following the completion of their conquest by the Romans in the first century BC. This can be seen in Alex Mullen's *Southern Gaul and the Mediterranean*, which argues that Southern Gauls prior Hellenization led to a sort of "cultural triangulation" between Gallic, Greek, and Roman culture in the region. This cultural instability was reflected in the linguistic world with the use of specific languages often limited to particular classes or professions. For example, Greek was mostly limited to the educated, artistic, and religious classes. The Greek-speaking communities in Southern France also resisted the transition to Latin for several centuries, which is reflected in the plethora of bilingual epigraphic data. On the other hand, aside from local names and a few loan words, all the evidence, as presented by Mullen, points to Gaulish being rapidly replaced by Latin or rather a regional variant of which there grew to be many.[28]

In conclusion, the above shows that the Gauls were perceived as more than simple "barbarians" according to the Romans. Admittedly, this was because the Romans saw them as something of an existential military and political threat for most of their history as reflected in Livy's *The History of Rome*. This perception, however, would eventually shift, leading the Romans to view the Gauls as just one more political neighbor, much like the Greeks, who had to be monitored, lest their actions potentially threaten Rome. Even so, when they were finally conquered, the Gauls Romanized at a frighteningly rapid pace, at least when compared to Greek-speaking communities. This in turn speaks truth to Eckstein's notion that Rome's ability to "assimilate outsiders" was part of its exceptionalism.[29]

27 Luley, *Continuity and Rupture*, 16, 50, 67-73, 75-78, 86.
28 Mullen, *Southern Gaul and the Mediterranean*, 264, 266, 274-277, 298.
29 Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy*, 245.