

WHEN THE OLD WORLD WAS THE NEW WORLD:
ROMAN ACCULTURATION OF INDIGENOUS CUSTOMS IN WESTERN EUROPE

Jamie Hoehn

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the acculturation of customs native to the people of Western Europe by Roman soldiers and citizens living on the frontier. This paper examines who these indigenous people were and focuses on their development from the middle of the fifth century BCE until several centuries after Roman conquest. There is an emphasis on the unique challenges presented by indigenous Europeans and how these challenges, either directly or indirectly, affected Roman culture. Although changes within the army are the primary focus of this paper, other aspects of frontier life are also examined, including self perception, trade and religion. Finally, this paper examines several ways by which native women spread their culture to the Romans.

Forward

Throughout this paper the terms ‘Gaul’ and ‘German’ are used to categorize the indigenous people living along the Rhine 2,000 years ago, particularly by primary sources. However, it is important to bear in mind that Gaul and German were labels imposed by the Romans and defined by Julius Caesar, who maintained that the Rhine served as an important political and cultural boundary between these two groups. While it is clear that the Romans perceived the Gauls and Germans as two distinct groups, it is far less clear how these people actually identified themselves. Because this paper argues that the peoples identified as Gallic and Germanic were really one culturally homogenous group, the terms Gaul and German are avoided whenever possible.

Map 1: Ancient Europe



Image courtesy of <<http://commons.wikimedia.org>>. Accessed April 23, 2009.

Introduction

The year is 58 BCE. Julius Caesar and his highly trained legions have undertaken a massive military campaign; Caesar has led his troops into the rebellious provinces of Gaul and Germania in Western Europe to wage war against Rome's enemies. But who were these people? What special challenges and unique circumstances did Rome encounter in Western Europe? And what consequences did this ultimately have for Rome?

In order to understand the effects which the peoples indigenous to Europe had on Rome, we must first understand who these people were. Focusing on the archaeological evidence, I will argue that the people who inhabited Gaul and Germania prior to the Roman conquest were not two distinct groups separated by the Rhine as Caesar asserts in his work *De Bello Gallico*,

written between 58 and 51 BCE. Rather, they comprised one group displaying a high degree of cultural continuity.

Focusing primarily on the years 100 BCE through 200 CE, this paper will identify and examine elements of indigenous culture which were adopted by Romans. The effects of Romanization on the people of Gaul and Germania have been widely studied, while the direct effects of acculturation¹ on Romans have tended to be overlooked. The consequences of Rome's efforts to colonize Gaul and Germania affected numerous aspects of Roman life and resulted in acculturation of indigenous customs by Romans living along this frontier. Although this paper focuses primarily on acculturation and change within the military, aspects of civilian life are also considered, including self perception, trade and religion. Additionally, the role played by native women in spreading their culture to the Romans is also examined.

A Modern Approach to an Ancient Topic

Our understanding of the people who inhabited Western Europe approximately 2,000 years ago is being drastically redefined. Until recently, a perplexing disconnect had existed between surviving ancient texts and the archaeological record. However, fresh approaches and new ideas are beginning to produce interpretations which both the texts and the material evidence support.

This cross-referencing between the texts and the archaeological evidence is very important, because individually neither one portrays the entire story. The ancient texts are able

¹Acculturation is defined as "the process of adopting the cultural traits or social patterns of another group" and "the processes of change in artifacts, customs, and beliefs that result from the contact of two or more cultures." Courtesy of <<http://www.dictionary.com>>. Accessed May 5, 2009.

to provide information which we simply cannot derive from material evidence. However, these same texts are also more likely than artifacts to provide misleading or inaccurate information. Because many ancient authors possessed biases and had various motivations for writing their texts, their works need to read critically. For example, in Caesar's work *De Bello Gallico*, the categorization of Gauls and Germans served to either glorify Caesar's military defeats or to justify his failures. Implicit in this work is Caesar's assertion that the Gauls were more civilized and could therefore be conquered and assimilated; Germans, on the other hand, were wilder and could not be successfully integrated into the Roman Empire.

At the same time, their works are often the only texts we have, and therefore they should and must be utilized. The indigenous societies in Western Europe were only in the beginning stages of developing a writing system at the time of Roman conquest, and they left very few written sources about themselves. The few examples we do have are grave markers and religious inscriptions. Still, Roman authors were not concerned with recording information such as how the indigenous people perceived themselves, or how women or elderly people were treated in their societies; for answers such as these we must turn to the archaeological evidence.

However, archaeology also has inherent problems. One such problem is an unintentional bias. Roman artifacts and settlements in Europe are typically more obvious to archaeologists than the indigenous material culture. This is in part due to their building materials (i.e. stone foundations are easier to identify than post holes for wooden structures). As Marcia L. Okun explains, "Although the majority of the population was probably local civilians, the minority of foreigners and soldiers are archaeologically more recognizable."² Furthermore, many

² Marcia L. Okun, "Pluralism in Germania Superior," in *Roman Frontier Studies 1989: Proceedings of the XVth International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies*, eds. Valerie A. Maxfield and Michael J. Dobson (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1991), 435.

archaeologists have simply been trained to look for these more apparent signs of habitation.³ Anthony King even writes about the tendency of archaeologists to design gridded town plans from very little evidence, simply assuming that a Gallic town from the early Roman Period would fit a certain pattern.⁴ We now know that this assumption is not always correct. Recent excavations at the provincial capital of Lyon have revealed a design plan more consistent with indigenous centers of habitation. It is for reasons such as these that the indigenous perspective has been overlooked, and the Roman perspective has been so heavily studied.

Indigenous Culture in Iron Age Europe

Although the geographic focus of this study may be culturally diverse today, the societies which existed in the central interior of Europe prior to the Roman conquest were much more homogenous. In order to obtain a better understanding of the indigenous culture in Iron Age Europe (circa eighth century BCE through first century BCE), it is beneficial to examine their society several centuries before the Roman conquest. Such an examination supports the argument that despite what Julius Caesar described, there was actually very little difference between the lands he identified as “Gaul” and “Germania”. In fact, if we were to look solely at the archaeological evidence, we would likely not conclude that the Rhine represented any sort of political or cultural boundary.

One argument for cultural continuity across the Rhine is the existence of a relatively homogenous material culture, which included “similar settlement types, house forms, burial

³ Peter S. Wells, *The Barbarians Speak: How the Conquered Peoples Shaped Roman Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 127.

⁴ Anthony King, *Roman Gaul and Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 73.

practices, and similar pottery, iron tools, bronze and glass ornaments, and coins.”⁵ This similar material culture is characterized by a specific style of ornamentation known as La Tene. La Tene is also the name applied to this era. The La Tene style first appeared during the fifth century BCE in the middle Rhineland. By the fourth century BCE, it had spread throughout Europe, west to the Atlantic Ocean and as far east as Hungary.⁶ The La Tene culture is clearly discernable in the archaeological record, as there was a sudden emergence of a new style of pottery, more elaborate inhumation burials, *fibulae* (special pins used to keep clothing in place), and *oppida* (villages fortified by earthen walls and other natural features). As Peter S. Wells writes,

The widespread adoption of this style surely indicated the formation of a shared identity on some level. The style became common throughout the central regions of temperate Europe, and its use on personal ornaments, weapons and pottery distinguished their possessors from peoples on the shores of the Mediterranean to their south and on the North European Plain to their north.⁷

Early La Tene burials throughout the interior of Europe, including on both sides of the Rhine, contained similar grave goods. These grave goods included large neck rings and other items of local manufacture, as well as modified Greek pots (the indigenous Europeans had been in contact with the Greeks since 600 BCE, with the founding of Massilia in southern Gaul).

Even Caesar described groups who crossed the Rhine, indicating that this supposed boundary was not as rigid as he occasionally attested. “The Boii, who had lived on the other [east] side of the Rhine but had crossed into Noricon territory and attacked the town of Noreia, became their allies and went with them.”⁸ Here Caesar discussed a band which crossed into

⁵ Wells, *The Barbarians Speak*, 112.

⁶ Klaus Sallmann, “Reserved for Eternal Punishment: The Elder Pliny's View of Free Germania,” *The American Journal of Philology* 108 (Spring 1987): 108-128.

⁷ Wells, *Beyond Celts, Germans and Scythians*, 68.

⁸ Julius Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, trans. Anne Wiseman and Peter Wiseman (London: Russel Sharp Ltd., 1980), 1.5.

Gaul from what he identified as the Germanic side of the Rhine and joined forces with another group. Additionally, Caesar provided information about an important leader, writing that,

[Dumnorix] had wide reaching power not only in his own country but also among neighboring tribes. To confirm this influence he had arranged a marriage between his mother and a very powerful and distinguished citizen of the Bituriges. He himself had a Helvetian wife, and his half sister and other female relatives were married into various other tribes.⁹

While the people indigenous to Western Europe may have had regional affiliations and strong kin networks, evidence suggests that they were likely not as deeply entrenched in tribal groups and political affiliations as Caesar asserted. Examples of shared customs and intermarriage can be found throughout *De Bello Gallico*, and Caesar frequently made assertions which he later contradicted. For example, when describing a group he identified as the Belgae he first wrote that they were distinct from the Germans. A few paragraphs later he stated that the Belgae were actually descendents of the Germans and that they were all related.¹⁰

One concept which is important to bear in mind when discussing the social structure of the ancient world is that literate and non-literate societies function very differently. Because non-literate societies transmit all of their information through words and actions, neighboring non-literate groups are much more likely to display variations in customs, stories, buildings, and the performance of complex rituals than are neighboring literate groups.¹¹ This inherent difference may be another reason (besides personal political ambitions) why Caesar identified so many different territories, tribes and clans. In fact his reader is left to wonder if such a plethora of distinct groups really existed to the same degree which Caesar asserted. This question is especially striking with regards to the Remi and the Suessiones, neighboring tribes who were “close kinsmen, sharing the same rights and customs and under the same command and

⁹ Ibid., 1.18.

¹⁰ Ibid., 2.1-2.4.

¹¹ Wells, *Beyond Celts, Germans and Scythians*, 19.

authority.”¹² With all of these common factors, it would seem as if they were actually members of the same tribe. Caesar perceived these groups as distinct, because they displayed marked differences in areas which he believed to indicate group identity. However, the differences which Caesar observed may have due to the fact that they were members of a non-literate society. Based on the archaeological evidence it appears that virtually all of Gaul and Germania was culturally homogenous prior to the Roman Period (circa first century BCE through third century BCE).

A final argument to support that the Gauls and the Germans were really one group possessing the same culture is based on their spoken languages. While distinct linguistic variations existed on the extreme edges of Europe, we have little conclusive evidence about the languages of indigenous peoples within the interior of Europe. Europe’s interior and especially the Rhineland may have been an area of linguistic overlap.¹³ Some scholars maintain a linguistic separation between the Gauls and the Germans, while others assert that the languages were very similar. Herzog Wolfram writes that the people who lived along the Rhineland were “confusingly polyglot.”¹⁴ One reason why scholars are not certain about the indigenous languages spoken along the Rhine is because the native inhabitants left very few written sources, and those which they did leave behind were oftentimes in Latin. However, based on the remaining ancient texts and inscriptions, increasingly more scholars are accepting the theory that it was not until after Roman contact that radical differences in language arose in the area along the Rhine. These differences are manifest today in the Romance and Germanic branches of the Indo-European language tree.

¹² *De Bello Gallico* 2.3.

¹³ Wells, *The Barbarians Speak*, 116.

¹⁴ Herwig Wolfram, *The Roman Empire and its Germanic Peoples*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 3.

Roman Responses, Reactions and Acculturation

Because the archaeological evidence, and even some ancient texts, indicate that the peoples living in Gaul and Germania were really one culturally continuous group which displayed similar burial practices, settlement types and other expressions of material culture, we can in turn more easily understand the influences both the “Gauls” and the “Germans” had on Roman culture. It is interesting to note that as the indigenous groups living along the Rhine became more Roman, the Romans in this area were simultaneously becoming more acculturated to indigenous customs.¹⁵ Cultural exchange worked in both directions; nothing is one-sided. There is always a cause and an effect, a catalyst and a reaction (and often another reaction). Many of the changes and effects on the tribes can also be applied to the Romans. This idea is very straightforward, and yet it is often underacknowledged.

Because many of the soldiers who were stationed in the Rhineland came not only from Rome proper, but from many other locations throughout the Roman Empire, they would not necessarily have adhered to the belief of Rome’s innate superiority. Without such preconceived notions, these soldiers were more open to absorbing elements of native culture. Nonetheless, these soldiers were serving in the Roman army, and their acculturation of native customs directly affected the Roman institution in which they served.

Self Perception

One way by which Roman culture was transformed through its contact with the northern tribes was a change in self perception.¹⁶ Romans adjusted how they viewed themselves by comparing their own morals and traditions with those indigenous to Europe. These comparisons

¹⁵ Wells, *The Barbarians Speak*, 225.

¹⁶ Wells, *Beyond Celts, Germans and Scythians*, 105.

often bolstered the Roman sense of superiority and reaffirmed their beliefs that their imperial pursuits were justified. Occasionally, though, such comparisons were used to criticize Roman culture. This is especially clear in the book *Germany and Its Tribes*, written by Cornelius Tacitus at the end of the first century CE. He wrote that the German “marriage code [...] is strict, and indeed no other part of their manners is more praiseworthy.”¹⁷ Furthermore, “no one in Germany laughs at vice, nor do they call it the fashion to corrupt and be corrupted.”¹⁸ Throughout this work, Tacitus indirectly criticized what he perceived as Roman decadence and moral decay.

Tacitus was the exception, however; in general most accounts of the northern tribes functioned to increase Roman *hubris*. While some accounts were true, others were probably false. For example, the assertion that many native warriors would often collect the heads of their enemies and display them with pride was true.¹⁹ Conversely, this information written by Julius Caesar is likely false: “This is the Gauls’ customary way of starting a war. A law, common to all the Gallic tribes, requires all adult males to come to the muster armed; the last man to arrive is most cruelly tortured and put to death, watched by all the assembled throng.”²⁰ Both of these examples exemplified the alleged barbarity of the indigenous Europeans. In turn, this served to make the Romans feel more civilized in their own war practices. This “us-versus-them” mentality was an effective way for the Romans to justify their own cruelty.

Not only did the way Rome viewed herself temper relations between the two groups, but the way that Rome viewed the tribes also had an important effect. For example, Rome had a

¹⁷ Cornelius Tacitus, *Germany and Its Tribes* in *Complete Works of Tacitus*, trans. trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb, ed. Moses Hadas (New York: Modern Library, 1942), XVIII.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, XIX.

¹⁹ Strabo, *Geography* 4.4.2, in Philip Freeman, *War, Women and Druids: Eyewitness Reports and Early Accounts of the Ancient Celts* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 13.

²⁰ *De Bello Gallico* 5.56.

tendency to interpret those peoples within the Empire as being effectively Romanized. As Wells writes, “even though the majority of the inhabitants continued to identify themselves as indigenous peoples, from Rome’s viewpoint they had been incorporated into the Roman cultural sphere.”²¹ We know that the indigenous people continued to identify themselves as distinct from the Romans based on their grave goods and other material evidence found within indigenous settlements. The majority of artifacts recovered are of indigenous design and manufacture. However items have also been recovered, primarily from elite dwellings, which were clearly derived via trade with distant lands.

Trade

Through information from both textual sources and archaeological evidence, it is clear that Greece had been engaged in trade with indigenous groups since about 600 BCE. These well-established trade routes ultimately benefited the Romans. Goods such as natural resources, slaves and manufactured items were traded in both directions and both societies benefited.²²

It is much easier to determine what and where commodities were traded than how they were traded. The distribution of locally minted coins provides an accurate portrayal of some trade networks, and we know that rivers were important links in trade routes. However, little is known about specific trade agreements or the laws which dictated trade. Anthony King has suggested that most trade was conducted in the Gallic languages and according to Gallic customs and specifications.²³ Some traders took advantage of these circumstances:

The Gauls are exceedingly fond of wine and sate themselves with the unmixed wine imported by merchants; their desire makes them drink it greedily and when they become drunk they fall into a stupor or into a maniacal disposition. Therefore many Italian

²¹ Wells, *The Barbarians Speak*, 94.

²² Wells, *Beyond Celts, Germans and Scythians*, 67.

²³ King, *Roman Gaul and Germany*, 111.

merchants... look upon the Gallic love of wine as their treasure trove. They transport the wine by boat on the navigable rivers and by wagon through the plains, and receive in return for it an incredibly high price; for one jar of wine they receive in return a slave, a servant in exchange for the drink.²⁴

We also know about a specific trade agreement between Roman and native merchants.

This special agreement is identified by the Latin term *ius commercii*; we do not know how this arrangement was articulated in the native languages. *Ius commercii* was a Latin term unique to Rome's trade with Europe and through it, "Roman traders were presumably granted safe-conduct [...] and were perhaps also exempt from any taxes on their goods."²⁵ Roman traders, many of whom were from other parts of the Empire besides Rome, did not limit themselves to the areas of Europe which had been conquered.²⁶ Roman merchants and traders were always searching for new markets and new commodities, and thus explored foreign lands where soldiers did not venture. Evidence of Roman and other foreign merchants have been found far beyond the Roman frontier zone along the Rhine. Of course, these merchants did not conduct business so far afield without assistance; various indigenous groups served as intermediaries along trade routes. As a result, native merchants and kings also prospered. They were able to tax the commodities and luxury goods which passed through their lands. This extra money may then have been reinvested into their settlements, fueling additional economic and agricultural growth.²⁷ As Wells writes, "the raw materials of the western Rhineland, including fine potting clays, limestone, basalt, and rich deposits of iron ore, made possible the great economic flourishing of this region during the first and second centuries A.D."²⁸

²⁴ Diodorus Siculus, in King, *Roman Gaul and Germany*, 13.

²⁵ Lynn F. Pitts, "Relations between Rome and the German 'Kings' on the Middle Danube in the First to Fourth Centuries A.D.," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 79 (1989): 45-58.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Wells, *The Barbarians Speak*, 9.

Religion

In addition to economic developments, the religious practices of both groups were also affected by the Romans' responses to, and perceptions of, indigenous culture. One of the more well-known aspects of indigenous European culture is the priestly class, the Druids. The Druids were respected members of their societies; not only did they perform religious rites, but they also helped to make important political decisions. Caesar wrote, "If a crime is committed, if there is a murder, or if there is a dispute about an inheritance or a boundary, they are the ones who give a verdict and decide on the punishment or compensation appropriate in each case."²⁹ The Druid priests were both male and female. They were very well educated, sometimes spending over 20 years on their studies and traveling to Britain to receive the best Druidic training and education.³⁰

Despite their prestige within their own society, the Druids were highly offensive to the sensibilities of a true Roman. The main reason for this was due to the Druidic practice of human sacrifice. While Rome usually allowed the indigenous people whom they conquered to continue their traditional religious customs, an exception was made for the Druids. As the biographer Suetonius wrote, "Claudius destroyed the horrible and inhuman religion of the Gaulish Druids, which had merely been forbidden to Roman citizens under Augustus."³¹ Under the reign of Augustus (r. 27 BCE-CE 14), Roman citizens were banned from practicing Druidism, and Tiberius (r. CE 14-37) banned everyone within the Empire from practicing Druidism. Claudius (r. CE 41-54) worked to completely eradicate the religion, although it is highly likely that pockets of Druidism still remained.

²⁹ *De Bello Gallico* 6.13.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.13-14. This tradition of scholarship is evident by the amount of orators, philosophers and politicians originating from Gaul and Germania.

³¹ Suetonius, *Claudius* 25, in Freeman, *War, Women and Druids*, 46.

Indigenous religious practices had other effects on the Romans as well. The belief in reincarnation freed the native peoples from worrying about death, because as the Roman poet Lucan observed, “the same spirit lives again in another world/ and death, if your songs are true, is but the middle of a long life.”³² This belief allowed the warriors to be much fiercer in battle and more difficult for the Romans to defeat. Caesar elaborated: “The cardinal teaching of the Druids is that the soul does not perish, but after death passes from one body to another. Because of this teaching that death is only a transition, they are able to encourage fearlessness in battle.”³³ Julius Caesar experienced the results of this fearlessness firsthand, often commenting on the bravery of his enemies and expounding upon their martial valor.³⁴ In response to this bravery, the Romans had to adjust how they fought against their northern enemies.

In addition to their belief in reincarnation, the Druids also practiced divination. This practice foiled Caesar’s plans on numerous occasions, and he recorded that “apparently it is customary among the Germans for their matrons to draw lots and use other sorts of divination to decide whether or not it is advisable to engage in battle...”³⁵ Prominent Romans, even those who lived centuries after Rome’s conquest of Gaul, also consulted the Druids. Vopiscus wrote, “On certain occasions Aurelian would consult Gaulish Druidesses to discover whether or not his descendants would continue to rule. They told him that no name would be more famous than those of the line of Claudius.”³⁶

There are two indigenous goddesses whose worship was adopted by Roman soldiers: Nehelennia and Epona. Unfortunately little is known about these two deities. Nehelennia was

³² Lucan, *Civil War* 1.457-458, in Freeman, *War, Women and Druids*, 47.

³³ *De Bello Gallico* 6.16.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.33.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.50.

³⁶ Vopiscus, *Aurelianus* 43.4, in Freeman, *War, Women and Druids*, 49-50.

the goddess of seafarers and was also commonly linked to fertility. Inscriptions praising her were commissioned by Roman citizens.³⁷ Epona was a horse goddess, and her name is related to the Celtic word for horse.³⁸ The worship of Epona ranged throughout almost all of Europe, and evidence of her worship has even been found in Rome. It is believed that the popularity of this goddess spread via the military, perhaps entering by way of the auxiliary troops and then being adopted by Roman legionaries, who brought her worship home with them after retirement.

Interestingly, it was not just upon the soldiers that this religion made a favorable impression. These beliefs and morals also appealed to some Roman senators. Even after the spread of Christianity, both indigenous Europeans and senators tended to remain devoutly pagan, and as such maintained their deep veneration for their ancestors. This commonality in beliefs fostered a sort of respect amongst some senators for various politically ambitious native Europeans, whom they would occasionally support. In return, these men granted the senators increased privileges if they came to power.³⁹

The Army

There is some debate about Rome's grand strategy in Europe: were the motivating factors offensive or defensive? Were Rome's goals imperialistic, or was she merely protecting herself? Although Caesar wrote that he often fought because he had been appealed to for help,⁴⁰ most scholars now generally agree that Caesar entered Europe, and even intentionally fostered dissent amongst the tribes, in order to increase his own reputation in Rome as a skilled general and statesman. Other Romans were also in favor of agitation, including Tacitus. "May the tribes, I

³⁷ Wells, *The Barbarians Speak*, 185.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 184.

³⁹ Wolfram, *The Roman Empire and its Germanic Peoples*, 58-59.

⁴⁰ *De Bello Gallico* 1.11. This is just once instance when a tribe appealed to Caesar to protect them.

pray, ever retain, if not love for us, at least hatred for each other; for while the destinies of empire hurry us on, fortune can give no greater boon than discord among our foes.”⁴¹

Regardless of the actual reasons for war with the northern tribes, these lengthy centuries of fighting ultimately brought hundreds of thousands of people into contact who otherwise would never have met. As Tacitus wrote, “[...] certain tribes and kingdoms are newly known to us, revealed by war.”⁴² While the most prevalent group to move into the Northern provinces was soldiers, civilians were also common.

The two main groups of soldiers in the Roman army were legionaries and auxiliaries. Legionaries were Roman citizens; the auxiliary troops were free non-citizens, also called peregrines.⁴³ These auxiliary troops came from all over the empire and were granted citizenship at the end of their term of service, typically 20 to 25 years. Friendships were often formed between legionaries and auxiliaries, an important way by which citizens learned about the customs and traditions of non-citizens. Because the majority of a man’s time in service was spent under conditions of peace,⁴⁴ there was plenty of opportunity for friendships to develop. Julius Caesar formed several close bonds with auxiliary soldiers serving under his command, and he often professed to worry about offending them and their allies.⁴⁵

The indigenous auxiliary troops served a variety of special functions within the Roman army. Wells writes that “from an early stage of Roman involvement in temperate Europe, Caesar and other generals took advantage of indigenous military practices to further the imperial

⁴¹ Tacitus, *Germany and Its Tribes*, XXXIII.

⁴² Ibid., I.

⁴³ George Ronald Watson, *The Roman Soldier* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 39.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁵ *De Bello Gallico* 1.19.

aims of Rome.”⁴⁶ This included utilizing indigenous weapons. Not only did exotic weapons intimidate enemies in other parts of the Empire, but the Romans took pleasure in defeating various indigenous groups with their own weapons.⁴⁷ While all troops were encouraged to swim during the summer months, evidence suggests that auxiliary troops were the most skilled.⁴⁸ Interestingly, Romans tended to use the indigenous system for measuring distances; a *leuga* was equivalent to about 1.5 Roman miles.⁴⁹

Auxiliary troops also served as translators; it was extremely helpful to have men in the army who could speak both Latin and several native dialects. Throughout *De Bello Gallico* Caesar discussed his need for reliable translators⁵⁰ despite the fact that Latin was the official language of the Roman army.⁵¹ However, these trained translators could also be a liability. Caesar reported that he sent his important correspondences written in Greek, just in case they were intercepted by a native who was fluent in Latin.⁵²

One of the more challenging aspects with which Rome had to contend in Europe related to diplomacy. Occasionally Rome preferred diplomatic relations to outright conquest. Centurions often served as diplomats.⁵³ Diplomatic relations with the indigenous Europeans were challenging to the Romans, because they did not understand the indigenous conception of loyalty. Indigenous groups believed that when their leader made an agreement with another leader, that agreement lasted only as long as those two specific men were in power. Every time

⁴⁶ Wells, *The Barbarians Speak*, 73.

⁴⁷ Edward Dabrowa, “Dromedarii and the Roman Army: A Note,” in *Roman Frontier Studies 1989: Proceedings of the XVth International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies*, eds. Valerie A. Maxfield and Michael J. Dobson (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1991), 364.

⁴⁸ Watson, *The Roman Soldier*, 55.

⁴⁹ Theodor Mommsen, *The Provinces of the Roman Empire: The European Provinces* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 108.

⁵⁰ *De Bello Gallico* 1.47.

⁵¹ Watson, *The Roman Soldier*, 38.

⁵² *De Bello Gallico* 5.48.

⁵³ Watson, *The Roman Soldier*, 146.

power shifted hands within a tribe, Rome had to renegotiate treaties and agreements with the new leader.⁵⁴ This led the Romans to view the tribes as unreliable and deceptive. Caesar wrote that “I felt uneasy because of the temperament of the Gauls: they are always ready to change one plan for another and in general are always eager for political change, and I thought I ought not to rely on them.”⁵⁵

Even something as basic as the location of a fort was influenced by the natives. For example, some forts were erected to discourage a powerful group or because a settlement was nearby which could provide supplies. Cologne was situated near a large indigenous settlement. Trier was established because the powerful tribe of the Trevari was living nearby. In Trier many of the houses and settlements were built according to indigenous methods, even houses which may have been inhabited by Roman citizens.⁵⁶ The indigenous style structures were made out of wood, whereas the Roman style of construction relied more heavily on stone foundations. A settlement with similar discoveries is Auerberg. This settlement was inhabited by Roman citizens, indigenous peoples and soldiers, and yet the entire settlement was built according to the native style. However, as Caesar learned the hard way, building in the indigenous style could also prove to be a liability:

When the siege was in its seventh day, a very strong wind blew up and the enemy started slinging red-hot missiles made of molded clay and hurling incendiary darts at the huts in the camp. These huts were thatched with straw in the Gallic fashion and so caught fire quickly, and the strong wind spread the flames all over the camp.⁵⁷

Another settlement type common in the conquered regions of Europe was the *vicus* (plural is *vici*). These *vici* were extremely important areas for interaction between Roman troops

⁵⁴ Lynn F. Pitts, “Relations between Rome and the German ‘Kings’ on the Middle Danube in the First to Fourth Centuries A.D.,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 79 (1989): 45-58.

⁵⁵ *De Bello Gallico* 4.5. This does not seem like a good description for a group of people who Caesar described as allegedly having very rigid political boundaries and traditions.

⁵⁶ Wells, *The Barbarians Speak*, 174.

⁵⁷ *De Bello Gallico* 4.43.

and natives. Without the indigenous peoples operating *vici* and providing food and supplies to the army, Rome would never have been able to colonize the region. Military forts were the base from which Rome instituted the infrastructure needed to be successful, including its developed system of roads. The *vici* provided supplies, and in return Rome offered wealth, material comforts and large-scale public works.

In the year 100 C.E., the Roman army consisted of approximately 300,000 soldiers, about one third of whom were stationed in Western Europe.⁵⁸ The huge number of troops stationed in the Rhineland required an incredible amount of supplies. For example, it has been estimated that one legion (5,000 soldiers) would have required the hides of 54,000 calves for their tents.⁵⁹ While the soldiers could have produced some of their supplies themselves, a great share was also derived from craftsmen and farmers within the *vici*. This was a huge stimulus to the local economy.

In addition to providing food and raw materials, indigenous merchants living in the *vici* also produced various manufactured goods for the soldiers, including even their armor and helmets. Not only did the craftsmen produce the helmets, but they even improved upon their designs.⁶⁰ La Tene style *fibulae* were also produced for Roman soldiers, a distinct native custom adopted by the Romans. As is evident from Roman graves and settlement sites, Roman soldiers began wearing *fibulae* shortly after Rome's conquests over Gaul and Germania.⁶¹ Additionally, archaeologists have found an abundance of pottery in the La Tene style at Roman forts. There is no way of knowing whether the Roman troops developed a taste for this style or if the production

⁵⁸ Wells, *The Barbarians Speak*, 133.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁶⁰ Peter Connolly, "The Roman Fighting Technique Deduced from Armour and Weaponry" in *Roman Frontier Studies 1989: Proceedings of the XVth International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies*, eds. Valerie A. Maxfield and Michael J. Dobson (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1991), 361.

⁶¹ Wells, *The Barbarians Speak*, 157.

Image 1: La Tene style *fibulae*



Image courtesy of <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Brooches_green.jpg>. Accessed May 5, 2009.

was at the discretion of the indigenous craftsman. Whichever the case may have been, the fact remains that Romanization was not as complete as previously thought. In fact, some Roman soldiers became so entrenched in the indigenous culture that they could easily blend in. George Ronald Watson writes that “the gradual assimilation of the frontier soldiers with the people against whom they served had [an] unfortunate effect upon discipline. In times of crisis soldiers, especially recruits, tended to slip away from the posts and disappear into the background of the civilian population.”⁶²

An interesting idea to consider when thinking about the martial consequences of European and Roman contact is that Rome had effectively created the enemy who would ultimately overthrow the western part of the Empire. The fact that the Romans were constantly trying to expand their own frontier was understandably perceived as aggression, and the peoples

⁶² Watson, *The Roman Soldier*, 142.

in Gaul and Germania likewise responded with more aggression. As an important leader, Ariovistus, said to Caesar:

I was in Gaul before your people were, Caesar. Until now the Roman army never left the boundaries of the Roman province of Gaul. What do you mean by coming into lands that belong to me? This part of Gaul is my province, just as the other is yours. If I invaded your territory, it would be right for you to object; in exactly the same way it is wrong that you are interfering with me in a matter that falls entirely within my rights.⁶³

In addition to stoking frustrations via Roman imposed borders and land seizures, Rome also sealed her own fate by training her enemies. Most influential native men were Roman educated and many were familiar with the intricacies of Roman culture; some were even citizens.⁶⁴ The most highly skilled and well-trained cavalry in the Roman army were indigenous men from throughout Europe.⁶⁵ In retrospect, this appears to be a very shortsighted strategy, for it was only a matter of time before they used their skills against the Romans.

A prime example of Rome's strategy coming back to haunt her is the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest. This battle, which took place in 9 CE, was led by a native man named Arminius. Arminius had achieved many great victories while fighting in the Roman army and he was highly respected by both the Romans and his own people. However, fed up with Roman interference in the land of his birth, Arminius staged a massive ambush against the Roman army. As it happened, three Roman legions, along with their servants and families, were being led through the Teutoburg Forest to their winter quarters by Publius Quintilius Varus, Arminius' own commander. Over the course of several days the native warriors attacked these forces and then disappeared into the forest, attacked and withdrew. On the third morning they finally

⁶³ *De Bello Gallico* 1.44.

⁶⁴ Klaus Sallmann, "Reserved for Eternal Punishment: The Elder Pliny's View of Free Germania," *The American Journal of Philology* 108 (Spring 1987): 108-128.

⁶⁵ *De Bello Gallico* 7.13.

finished their grim task by trapping the Roman army on a narrow path between swampland and a dense forest. Rather than die at the hands of Arminius, Varus fell upon his own sword.⁶⁶

It has been estimated that during this battle, Arminius and his rebel forces slaughtered approximately 20,000 people, some of whom “were crucified, buried alive or sacrificed on makeshift altars. The Germans impaled victims' heads on spears or nailed them to tree trunks.”⁶⁷ As Rome had a total of 30 legions in the year 9 CE, these three decimated legions represented 10% of the Roman legionary forces. When the Emperor Augustus was informed of this massive defeat, he is reported to have banged his head against a wall, crying out “Varus, give me back my legions!”⁶⁸ Despite Augustus’ best efforts to regain territory, the victory in the Teutoburg Forest effectively halted the Roman advance to the northeast, permanently establishing the frontier lines and preventing Rome from taking over the whole of Europe.⁶⁹ Furthermore, the three legions numbered XVII, XVIII and XIX which were destroyed in the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest were never reformed; nor were their numbers ever reused.⁷⁰ Arminius and his troops had successfully “robbed even a Caesar of Varus and his three legions.”⁷¹

In addition to outright battle, the indigenous Europeans were able to undermine the Roman army in a number of other ways as well. One of the more effective methods was through spies. Spies in the Roman army must have been fairly common, because Caesar referred to them with some frequency. He even wrote that “it was only natural that among the large number of

17. ⁶⁶ Richard A. Gabriel, “What We Learned... from the Teutoburg Forest,” *Military History* 25:4 (2008): 17-

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ *Warriors*. History Channel. April 2009.

⁶⁹ Wells, *The Barbarians Speak*, 4.

⁷⁰ Watson, *The Roman Soldier*, 121.

⁷¹ Tacitus, *Germany and Its Tribes*, XXXVII.

Gallic cavalry in his camp there should be some who supported the Gallic cause.’’⁷² Caesar also reported that some informants were willing soldiers serving the Roman army, while others had been taken as hostages.⁷³ Besides spying on and slaughtering the Roman army, Caesar wrote that marauding tribesmen also occasionally captured Roman citizens and sold them into slavery far to the north.⁷⁴

One final effect which indigenous culture had upon the Roman army was that the lands of Gaul and Germania, and especially the *vici*, provided a secure and comfortable location for soldiers upon retirement.⁷⁵ Interestingly, various ancient inscriptions from the Rhineland even suggest the presence of organizations which resemble our modern day veterans’ associations.⁷⁶ While in some parts of the Empire veterans spent their retirement in poverty and gloom, veterans living in the Rhineland were well cared for by the local people; veterans were able to maintain their status and prestige. This was in large part due to the fact that throughout northern Gaul and Germany, a large percentage of the population was made up of military men. The natives were used to, and comfortable with, the presence of Roman troops. Another reason why the Rhineland may have been a popular location for retirement was that the natives were appreciative of the many public works the army had completed, including roads and large-scale architecture. Out of gratitude for these projects, veterans were well received into villages. While some veterans retired to Gaul and Germania with their families, others did not marry until after retirement, when they were between 40 and 50 years old. The contact between Roman men and native women is a very interesting, although somewhat mysterious, means by which indigenous culture was disseminated.

⁷² *De Bello Gallico* 6.7.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 2.17.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.42.

⁷⁵ Watson, *The Roman Soldier*, 141.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 152-153.

The Role of Women in Cultural Exchange

The contact between Roman men and native women occurred under a variety of conditions ranging from casual encounters to lifelong partnerships. Roman men had fleeting relationships with native women, and marriages between the two groups were common. Native women were also taken as booty, viewed by soldiers as rewards for their martial efforts. Although there is little written about native women in ancient texts and it is difficult to derive information from the archaeological record, the contact between native women and Roman soldiers was certainly an important way through which native culture was spread.

When Julius Caesar first led his troops into Gaul, the army was operating under a policy which forbade soldiers from marrying. It was not until retirement, attained after 20 to 25 years of service, that soldiers were granted the “privilege” to marry. This policy was based on the belief that a soldier could not be married to both the military and another person. Bachelorhood kept a soldier’s mind clear, preventing him from being unnecessarily distracted.⁷⁷ An additional perceived advantage to this marriage ban was that it eased the complications of relocation; if the troops were comprised of unattached men, they would have no concerns over being separated from loved ones or managing the additional complications of bringing their family with them on campaigns.⁷⁸ Despite the marriage ban, however, civilians often traveled with the troops. This is evident in the concurrent construction of *vici* and forts, as determined by archaeological dating.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Brian Campbell, “Marriage of Soldiers under the Empire,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 68 (1978): 153-166.

⁷⁸ Watson, *The Roman Soldier*, 133.

⁷⁹ Margaret M. Roxan, “Women of the Frontiers,” in *Roman Frontier Studies 1989: Proceedings of the XVth International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies*, eds. Valerie A. Maxfield and Michael J. Dobson (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1991), 472.

Although discipline was strict in the Roman army, soldiers frequently disregarded the marriage ban. It was not unusual for soldiers to form relationships resembling marriages with indigenous women; children were also common. Letters and other official correspondence demonstrate that “the imperial administration was tolerant of the tendency of many soldiers to pay little attention to the marriage ban, and to form unofficial unions with women they subsequently regarded as their ‘wives.’”⁸⁰ Additionally, legal records indicate that many soldiers had a difficult time understanding why their marriages were not valid and why their children were therefore illegitimate.⁸¹

Evidence for marriages between active soldiers and native women can also be found by examining grave markers. Many women erected markers for their ‘husbands,’ and men also erected markers for their ‘wives.’ In some instances, upon his time of death the soldier had not yet been discharged and was therefore ineligible to legally marry. However, couples were undeterred, as the grave inscriptions indicate. One marker records that the couple had been married for 37 years; this union certainly began while the husband was still in the army.⁸² Often when a soldier had a long-term native partner with whom he had begotten children, he officially married her upon retirement and the couple continued residing in the *vici* where she had lived during his years of service.⁸³

Due to the ineffectiveness and unpopularity of the marriage ban, it was lifted in 197 CE by the Emperor Septimius Severus (r. 193-211). It is interesting to note that following the repeal

⁸⁰ Brian Campbell, “Marriage of Soldiers under the Empire,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 68 (1978): 153-166.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Margaret M. Roxan, “Women of the Frontiers,” in *Roman Frontier Studies 1989: Proceedings of the XVth International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies*, eds. Valerie A. Maxfield and Michael J. Dobson (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1991), 462.

⁸³ King, *Roman Gaul and Germany*, 161.

of the marriage ban, a marked increase in the size of *vici* occurred.⁸⁴ This fact has a variety of implications: either wives relocated *en masse* to be nearer their husbands; single women moved to the *vici* in search of husbands; or many soldiers suddenly decided to marry and have children.

Because it was common for soldiers to form relationships with native women and ultimately retire in the vicinity where they had been stationed, the question should be asked whether these men were more likely to return to Rome (or their home provinces) if they did not have an indigenous wife and/or children. It is possible that these illicit relationships, officially discouraged by the Roman government, actually helped to more firmly establish the Empire further abroad.

Of course, such marriages were not entirely beneficial to either soldiers or the Empire. In exchange for love and companionship during their years of service, soldiers had to make a variety of compromises. For example, soldiers had to set aside their notions of Roman superiority. An idea common during the time of Rome's conquest in Europe was that offspring produced between two different ethnic groups would be inferior to offspring produced between two Romans.⁸⁵ A man who chose to marry an indigenous woman may have felt he was jeopardizing his reproductive potential.

By marrying native women, soldiers also gave up the authority they would have had in a traditional Roman marriage. Women were treated differently in the provinces than in Rome. Tacitus recorded that the Germans "even believe that the [female] sex has a certain sanctity and prescience, and they do not despise their counsels, or make light of their answers."⁸⁶ These

⁸⁴ Watson, *The Roman Soldier*, 140.

⁸⁵ Benjamin Isaac, "Proto-racism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity," *World Archaeology* 38, no. 1 (2006): 32-47.

⁸⁶ Tacitus, *Germany and Its Tribes*, VIII.

women were very independent and autonomous, demanding respect from their men-folk.

Because women were esteemed members of their communities, they were entrusted with certain rights and responsibilities which some Romans may have found shocking. Tacitus recorded,

Lest the woman should think herself to stand apart from aspirations after noble deeds and from the perils of war, she is reminded by the ceremony which inaugurates marriage that she is her husband's partner in toil and danger, destined to suffer and to dare with him alike in both peace and war.⁸⁷

Additionally, indigenous women enjoyed a great deal of autonomy within their communities. They were allowed to choose their own marriage partners, so they were not looked down upon for marrying Roman men. These women could also own property. This fact may have been especially enticing to some troops in the Roman army, because active soldiers could not purchase land; only veterans could. However, a wife could purchase land on behalf of her husband and hold it for him until his discharge from service.⁸⁸

While the archaeological evidence tends to indicate a high degree of Romanization amongst the elite throughout Gaul and Germania, we cannot assume that whole communities were similarly acculturated. There is some evidence to suggest that less wealthy women were even resistant to acculturation. One area in particular which did not change for women was their manner of dress.⁸⁹ Food preparation and consumption did not change either. In certain regions of the empire, especially in the highly Romanized eastern provinces, numerous wine ladles and strainers have been found, indicating a change in the eating and drinking habits of the indigenous peoples.⁹⁰ However, the absence of these items in the Rhineland suggests that these women did

⁸⁷ Ibid., XVIII.

⁸⁸ Margaret M. Roxan, "Women of the Frontiers," in *Roman Frontier Studies 1989: Proceedings of the XVth International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies*, eds. Valerie A. Maxfield and Michael J. Dobson (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1991), 465.

⁸⁹ Wells, *Beyond Celts, Germans and Scythians*, 126.

⁹⁰ Lynn F. Pitts, "Relations between Rome and the German 'Kings' on the Middle Danube in the First to Fourth Centuries A.D.," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 79 (1989): 45-58.

not integrate Roman goods into their food customs. Their Roman husbands, therefore, would have had to adjust to eating and drinking in the indigenous manner.

But why did women not acculturate? One explanation is that they had less to gain by assimilating. Men could elevate their own status and achieve upward social mobility through their role as warrior elites, but this did not apply to women. Save for introducing new marriage partners into their remote villages, native women derived few benefits from Roman culture. In fact, Roman presence was particularly disadvantageous to native women; both their standing in their communities and their quality of life decreased. As Tacitus wrote,

Tradition says that armies already wavering and giving way have been rallied by women who, with earnest entreaties and bosoms laid bare, have vividly represented the horrors of captivity, which the Germans fear with such extreme dread on behalf of their women.⁹¹

Caesar also reported women begging their men to win battles so that they did not become slaves to the Romans.⁹² It is easy to understand how these fiercely independent women, women who sometimes fought alongside their menfolk in battles, would resent the changes which Roman culture introduced. This resistance to acculturate, in turn, left Roman soldiers in a difficult situation. If they wanted to form lasting relationships with indigenous women, they needed to be willing to adopt elements of native culture.

Conclusion

Although the majority of our knowledge about the peoples indigenous to Western Europe relates to Rome's military activities in the region, increasingly more information is becoming available pertaining to other aspects of life in Gaul and Germania as well. Due to rising interest

⁹¹ Tacitus, *Germany and Its Tribes*, VIII.

⁹² *Gallic War* 1.51.

in this topic, more funds for archaeological research are being allocated by both federal governments and private sources. The results of such archaeological investigations are providing new information and producing new interpretations of the peoples who lived in Western Europe 2,000 years ago. Additionally, fresh readings and new interpretations of the ancient texts are creating a richer, more nuanced understanding of the complex social relations which existed between indigenous Europeans and their Roman conquerors. By better understanding the Romans' acculturation of customs, ideas and practices indigenous to Western Europe, we can in turn achieve greater knowledge of, and a deeper appreciation for, Europe's history and ancestral heritage.

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