



John Sadler, Rosie Serdiville, *Caesar’s Greatest Victory. The Battle of Alesia, 52 BC*, Casemate Publishers, 2016, pp. 240, ISBN: 978-1-61200-405-1

Caesar was without a doubt one of the greatest general created by the Roman Army and mankind . Even though a lot of researchers consider that the subject of his military and political achievements is exhausted, there still are perspectives that show new faces of his “adventure” in Rome’s political life and in the provinces’ military one. This book subscribes to this tendency, and the authors go beyond naratting the essential moments during the military campaigns, considering at the same time the traditions and customs of the Celtic society and their attempt to evolve towards the Roman model, especially after Vercingetorix’s rise to power. In parallel we follow the events in Rome that influence Caesar’s career, and which often led him to taking close call decisions.

The book has 210 pages of text, and in between pages 82 and 83, there are 16 pages inserted with pictures and maps. The study in itself is divided in nine chapters, and is preceded by a section of thanks, a note that refers to the sources used and an introduction. At the end of the nine chapters there is a glossary, two appendixes, the notes, a bibliography and an index.

The first four chapters, along with the introduction, are based on the elements that created the framework of the events in the year 52BC, events that have culminated with the battle of Alesia. Thus, we can see the natural framework, the two combatant forces, their leaders and the leaders decisions until the battle’s final moment. The last four chapters describe the two leaders’ strategy, a strategy that they tried to adapt to the opponents fighting particularity.

The first chapter, *An ancient city in Gaul*, shows the natural framework of the decisive confrontation. Although most of the arguments assign the town of Alise-Sainte- Reine as the place where the siege took place, there are some specialists that the place was Chaux-des-Crotenay, in Juras and Alaise in Franche-Comte. In the last chapter, the authors declare themselves pretty clearly as supporting the first version.

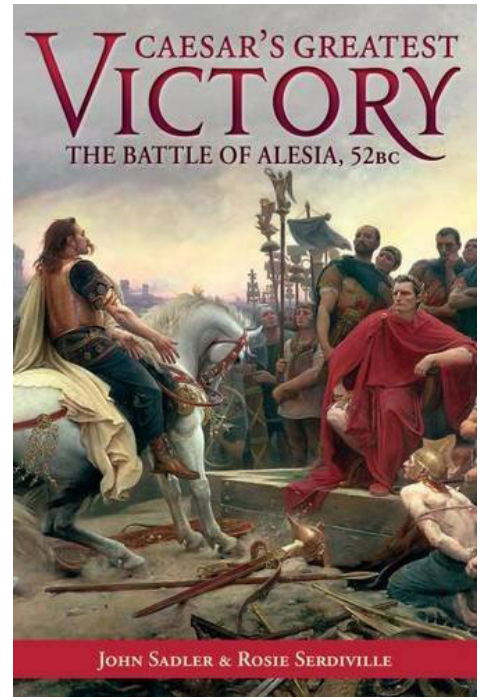
In the second chapter, *De Rei Militarii*, the authors present the defining elements of the Roman Army, which also represent the key to its success. A combination between discipline, practice, organization, cohesion, flexibility, command, equipment and morals, is that which drives the Roman Army towards victory.

The Gauls are presented in the third chapter, *Way of the Gaul*. Although written from a Roman perspective, Caesar’s writings are extremely important because they are the only sources written about the Gauls in that era. In this chapter there are presented the most important *oppida*, and also other elements of the Celtic culture, like the importance of women’s role in this society.

The Celtic warriors, their equipment and their combat style is described in the fourth chapter, *Way of the warrior*. Although a “nation” of fighters, the Celts often had serious difficulties in recruiting an army. Unlike the Romans, the Celts were not unitarily equipped, there were great discrepancies between

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the equipment and the weaponry of the elite and the rank-and-file. The Gauls were incapable of collaborating among themselves, this being their primary cause for their defeat.

Chapter five, *De Bello Gallico – The Gallic Wars 58-52BC*, debuts with Caesar's description, his career and evolution until the moment of the Gallic wars. Also, there are presented the Gallic tribes and the evolution of the war until the year 52BC. Alongside the battle in Gallia, Caesar must keep up with his political opponents in Rome and the expeditions in Germany and Britannia, which were mostly designed to counter his opponents.

If in chapter five the central figure is Caesar, the beginning of chapter six, *Total War 52BC*, centers on Vercingetorix and his strategy, namely destroying the supplies and the cities that can't be defended, leading in parallel a guerilla warfare. The purpose of this strategy was that of demoralising the Romans and winning by avoiding direct confrontations, in which the Romans had the advantage. During Vercingetorix's leadership is the first and only time when the Gallic tribes act together. The defeat at Avaricum didn't have a major impact on Vercingetorix, because he refused to defend it from the beginning, mostly this was a defeat of the Bituriges and not of the Gauls. But the siege of Gergovia produced changes in both camps. Vercingetorix started believing that the guerilla war he started and the implementations of some Roman tactics would be successful, and Caesar learned to wait for the perfect moment and to not let himself get carried away.

Chapter seven, *Tightening the vice*, follows the Roman Army's preparations for the siege of Alesia. The fortress was located in an extremely convenient position, and in order to conquer it serious efforts were needed. Thus, they build on the surrounding hills eight marching camps that were connected by two walls. These reached a length of circa 37¹ or 39² km, and the network of ditches that strengthened and linked them together, reached a length of approximately 74 km. Besides these there were also trap holes and other devices meant to hurt and slow down the opponent.

Chapter eight, *The relief and final battle*, presents the battle that decided the fate of the two armies, the fate of their leaders and that of the people represented by these leaders. Caesar and his army was forced to fight on two fronts: against the fighters in the city and against the immense force of release that was formed.

In order to gather such a numerous army, at least two months were needed, during this time the people of Alesia, whose provisions were rapidly decreasing, had to make two extreme decisions: to resort to cannibalism and to expel from the city the ones that couldn't fight.

The Gauls decided to use a night attack, hoping that the darkness would mask the general direction of the attack and it would make the Romans decide harder on how to act. Also, the probability that the Romans would strike accurately an invisible target, would drop significantly. The major problem concerning the night attacks, present even in ages in which technology has evolved a lot, is the confusion the darkness can create and the difficulty in coordinating the troops.

Despite Cesar was winning the battle of Alesia, the wars in Gallia didn't stop immediately. In chapter nine, *Legacy*, the authors follow the development of the events after Vercingetorix's surrender. He was held captive for six years, and after taking part in Caesar's Triumph, he was strangulated in Tullianum prison. Caesar fought Pompey in civil wars, and in 44 BC, at the age of 55 he was assassinated. Gallia was pacified and assimilated by creating colonies of veterans and by keeping the tribal elite in their functions.

Vercingetorix and Joan Of Arc were used in the French politics as symbols of independence and resistance against the invaders during the French Revolution, by Napoleon the third, Charles de Gaulle and even Jacques Chirac or François Mitterrand.

The *Glossary* contains a series of roman military terms and two modern terms used in connection with the Roman Army, and in Appendix 1 there are presented the forces that participated in the battle of Alesia and their effectives, the latter bases exclusively on the estimations offered by Caesar. Appendix 2 presents a circuit of visitation of the area where the events presented in this book took place.

Even though the bibliography isn't extremely dense, it is one well chosen, in such a way that it covers the essential aspects referring to the discussed issues. Among the main source represented by Caesar's description of the Gaellic wars, the authors mention the use and extrapolation where is useful and possibly of the latter antiques sources. Also works of modern authors who studied these aspects were used.

The battle of Alesia was a decisive moment in world History. Failure would have been a defeat for Caesar not just in Gaul, but at Rome, and without this victory, Rome might never have become a worldwide power.

¹ Page 132.

² Page 4.