

The Role of Alesia, Bibracte and Gergovia in the Mythology of the French State

John Collis

Historical Analogies

In the mythology of the origins and development of the French state, the Gallic past has played a special role over the last three centuries, and it still continues to do so. The main source for this vision is Julius Caesar's *Commentaries* on his conquest of Gaul in 58–51 BC, completed by his lieutenant Hirtius. In a recently published university lecture course Christian Goudineau (2005) lists four themes in the application of these ideas, along with quotes from contemporary sources, of which I will take one to illustrate each theme.

1) *Equating France with ancient Gaul.* Caesar was the first to define Gaul physically, bounded by the Atlantic to the west and the Rhine to the east, and, by implication, the Mediterranean and the Pyrenees to the south. These were considered to be the 'natural' boundaries to which the expanding French state could aspire, especially after the annexation of Burgundy in the 16th century epitomised by part of Cardinal Richelieu's testament following the battles of Rocroy, Thionville and Freiburg-in-Breisgau which saw Alsace and Lorraine brought under French rule:

The aim of my ministry has been to restore to Gaul its frontiers which were bequeathed to it by nature, to restore to the Gauls a Gallic king, to equate Gaul with France, and everywhere where there was the Ancient Gaul to replace it with the New.¹

2) *Our Ancestors the Gauls.* This was a theme which was especially prevalent in the middle and later years of the 19th century, and which was promoted by French historians from Amédée Thierry to Camille Julian (the latter recalled how he had been inspired by receiving a copy of Thierry's *Histoire des Gaulois* as a school prize). Characteristics were identified which supposedly the ancient

1 Translation by the author.

Gauls and the modern French shared in common, notably a love of freedom and a willingness to die for it. It has continued throughout the 20th century in school text books; I had a Vietnamese working for me in France in the 1980s who had been educated under the French colonial system, and he was amused how he had come to France 'to dig up his Gaulish ancestors'!

The first men who peopled the centre and west of Europe were the Gauls, our true ancestors; for their blood has been dominant by far in the succeeding mixture of the various people who make up our nation, and their spirit is still within us. Their virtues and their failings, preserved in the heart of the French people, and the essential characteristics of their physical make-up, recognisable despite the degeneration caused by the changes of customs and by the mixing of peoples, still bear witness to that ancient origin.²

3) *The identification of Vercingetorix as the first National Hero of France.* In the early stages of the conquest of Gaul Caesar dealt piecemeal with individual tribal states and leaders, or, at most, with coalitions such as those of the Belgae. It was not until the revolt of 53–52 BC that a coalition was put together which encompassed almost all the Gallic states, under the Arvernian Vercingetorix. He was the only Gaul to inflict a military defeat on Caesar himself, at the battle of *Gergovia*, and had he not abandoned his 'scorched earth' policy and been tempted into the skirmish which ended in the siege of *Alesia*, he might well have won.

Our history, like that of all peoples, is divided into three distinct epochs; at the summit of each one of them a great person has emerged who dominated all the others: in Antiquity, Vercingetorix; in the Middle Ages, Joan of Arc; and in modern times, Napoléon. Patriotism, belief, glory. And, as with everything great, it is accompanied by adversity, as each one had their ordeal: for Vercingetorix a barbarous death in the dungeons of Rome; for Joan of Arc the stake at Rouen; and for Napoléon captivity on Saint Helena.³

4) *Equating the defeat of 1870 with that of 52 BC.* In this scenario the Germans were equated with the Romans, Caesar with Bismarck, and the siege of Paris with that of *Alesia*.

2 H. Martin, *Histoire de France 1* (Paris: Furne, 1838).

3 A. Bréan, *Vercingetorix* (Orléans: A. Gatineau, 1864).