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Jean-Louis Brunaux, *Vercingétorix*. Paris: Gallimard, 2018. 336 pages. €22.00. (pb). ISBN 9782070178926.

Review by Christopher B. Krebs, Stanford University.

The Roman elegist Propertius, at the beginning of his second volume of poetry, addresses the public's reactions, factual or factitious, to his first collection (the famous *monobiblos*). Where, they ask, do all your smoothly running verses come from? What inspires you? My love, he says, is my inspiration (*ingenium nobis ipsa puella facit*, 2.1.4); and, in one of the more succinct definitions of poetic license, he adds how, in the face of his love, "the greatest story arises from nothing" (*maxima de nihilo nascitur historia*, 2.1.16).^[1]

As regards the story of Vercingetorix, the leader of the Gallic uprising against Julius Caesar and Rome in 52 BCE, whether or not we want to side with those radical skeptics who argue that we know "nothing" about him—we certainly know exceedingly little with even a semblance of historical certainty; and to complicate this liminal evidentiary situation further even, most of it may well be derived from *Caesar ipse* in the end (who, to say the least, had a stake in the matter).^[2] A quick roundup: Vercingetorix *may* have been born in the Arvernian town of Gergovia (some four miles to the south^[east] of Clermont-Ferrand on the Puy de Merdogne), as *Gallic War* 7.4 seems to suggest, and as the Greco-Roman geographer Strabo, slightly later, affirms (4.2.3; but this could well be based on no more than inference from the Caesarian passage).^[3] As for his date of birth, there is Caesar's reference to him as (*Gallic War* 7.4) *adulescens*, "a young man," a term both imprecise and, quite possibly, motivated by the literary tradition of other *young* war leaders that challenged Rome (such as Hannibal); but *if* it is accepted and *if* the term's most likely age range is assumed, a birthdate sometime in the 70s BCE (or late 80s) is our best guess. A member of the Arvernian elite, whose father had lost his life in power struggles and whose family remained divided over political questions (or so Caesar says—once again, it's all a little hackneyed), he may well have collaborated with Caesar early on (as was not only quite common under the circumstances but is also suggested by two later sources); if so, he turned against the Roman proconsul, established his (precarious, Caesar suggests time and again) leadership, formed a Gallic alliance, and not only inflicted a painful loss on the mighty Roman general at Gergovia (one of a total of only three, Suetonius says ^[4]) but brought him to the very brink of defeat and shameful retreat. In all of this he demonstrated consummate talent and skill and proved himself a worthy opponent of Caesar's, whose ultimate victory at Alesia in 52 thereby appeared all the more glorious—as the ancients understood but too well; *honi soit qui mal y pense* (cf. Quintilian *Institutes* 8.4.20).^[5] After Vercingetorix's surrender, we know from a later source that he was taken captive to Rome and imprisoned for six years, so that he could be paraded in the conqueror's triumph in 46, then summarily executed.

These iffy facts, to which a few, of similar nature, could be added, have been well known since the nineteenth century at least, as has most of the numismatic evidence; and they have been discussed with proper circumspection and sober clarity by Matthias Gelzer in 1955 and Yann Le Bohec in 1998 (to name but two of this reviewer's favorites).^[6] But this paltry motley of problematic information has not prevented the appearances of numerous "biographies" of Vercingetorix,^[7] often several hundred pages long, since—for various and variously complicated reasons—the Arvernian leader occupies a *special* place

in French history; of these Jean-Louis Brunaux's 2018 *Vercingétorix* is the latest.

An archaeologist at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique, Brunaux begins his biography with the monumental Vercingetorix at Alise-Sainte-Reine. Erected in 1866 under Napoléon III and decorated with a loosely adapted quotation from Caesar ("La Gaule unie Formant une seule nation Animée d'un même esprit Peut défier l'Univers:" *Gallic War* 7.29.6; oh the ironies!), it stands some twenty feet tall, dressed up and equipped as very few (if any) Gauls would have been dressed up and equipped at Vercingetorix's time, not to mention its uncanny resemblance to the commissioning emperor.[8] In both size and appearance, it counter-intentionally and all-the-more-beautifully emblemizes the result of Vercingetorix's transformation from an (important, no doubt, if we understand correctly the coins that bear his legend) character in Caesar's narrative to national hero, "*notre premier héros historique*," as Henri-Dominique Lacordaire would have it (and he is one of many).[9] Brunaux announces it as his task to leave such and similar not just imaginative but demonstrably mistaken representations of the Gallic leader behind: "Il faut redonner à Vercingétorix sa véritable apparence. Tâche redoutable mais qui n'est pas impossible" (p. 11). Unfortunately, he does no such thing.

The problem is not that a book entitled *Vercingétorix* contains "beaucoup de Gaule et peu de Vercingétorix"; this is ultimately, as Le Bohec has pointed out, the inevitable end of the two possible paths that lead from the very few likely facts specific to Vercingetorix to a full-scale, three-hundred-page biography such as this one: the biographer can either develop the "large tableau de la Gaule, certes utile pour comprendre le personnage, mais qui ne le concernait pas directement," or engage the reader in "l'identification des lieux parcourus par le chef gaulois et ... la description de ces sites" (or both, of course).[10] Brunaux very much does the former, and, given the many exciting archaeological developments of the past few decades, including aerial photography, I would agree with him that an archaeologist might be particularly well-positioned to make the Iron Age in France come alive again with Vercingetorix as one of its most captivating protagonists. No, the problem with this portrait of Vercingetorix is that Brunaux polishes the monumental figure he purports to topple (as is at its most striking, perhaps, in the opening pages of "Sous le regard de la postérité"), and on more than one occasion with recourse to outdated or demonstrably wrong concepts, not to mention some fanciful inferences.

The following is rather representative: when, early on, Brunaux sketches Gallic life, with its socio-cultural importance of hospitality and Roman connections, he asserts "[i]l est même possible que l'illustre Cicéron ait fait quelque séjour chez les deux frères éduens [sc. Dumnorix and Diviciacus], tout comme César en personne a pu [sic!] profiter, quelques années plus tard, de l'hospitalité de Vercingétorix" (p. 26). Unfortunately, neither is either "indicated" or "suggested" by the sources. As for the former, we are referred to a passage in Cicero's *On Divination* (the reference on p. 300, n.7 should be: 1.90), where Quintus mentions "the Druids in Gaul, one of whom I know myself: the Aeduan Diviciacus, your guest friend and admirer" (*in Gallia Druidae sunt, e quibus ipse Divitiacum [sic!] Haeduum hospitem tuum laudatoremque cognovi*);[11] that Diviciacus had stayed with Cicero in Rome in 61 BCE does not in and of itself make it in the least likely that the latter would have stayed with the former. Quite the contrary, in fact, Quintus' remarks very much suggest the opposite: for *if* Cicero had stayed in "Gaul" with a Druid, his brother would certainly have mentioned it here. There is similarly little to support the latter claim, extrapolated from Cassius Dio (*Roman History*, 40.41.1): after Alesia, "Vercingetorix could have escaped—he had not been captured, nor was he hurt—but he hoped to obtain his (sc. Caesar's) pardon, for they had once been on friendly terms (ὄτι ἐν φιλίᾳ ποτὲ τῷ Καίσαρι ἐγγόνει)."[12] It seems furthermore arbitrary at best to accept (and amplify) Dio's information here but to declare him "mistaken" with regard to another aspect of the same sentence in a different context later on (p. 271).

Just as problematic, if not more so, and riddled with inaccuracies, is the author's presentation of "la" Gaule and "les" Gaulois, culminating in assertions such as: "La Gaule était un idéal politique pour tous les Gaulois" (p. 38). Brunaux knows of those who argue that *Gallia* and the *Galli* are inventions of Caesar's; but, he claims, *Gallia* can already be found in the Greek polymath Posidonius; and really, he continues, it

was the druids who, “les premiers, théorisèrent le concept de Gaule plusieurs siècles avant la conquête romaine” (p. 34). There are several problems. First, and ultimately most fundamentally for his purposes, looking at material records, inscriptions and coins, there is very little evidence for individuals (such as Vercingetorix) or ethnic groups (tribes such as his *Arverni*) ascribing themselves to larger ethnic groupings, be it *Belgae* or *Galli*, before or even after the Roman conquest (an exception might be *CIL* 7.49 from *Aquae Sulis: Iulius Vitalis ... Natione Belga*).^[13] There is plenty of evidence, however, for tribal identification: in Lyon at the beautiful amphitheater of the three Gauls, as organized by Rome (*Gallia Aquitania*, *Gallia Belgica* and *Gallia Lugdunensis*), there are stones that bear the names of the individual tribes—but without any sign of differentiation between the three *Grossgruppen*.^[14] In the face of such evidence, Brunaux’s interpretation of etic mentions of trans-tribal (“national”) gatherings as indicative of emic “nationalism” founders. No less troubling but less consequential are Brunaux’s claims that Strabo is faithfully excerpting from Posidonius (p. 300, n.13), who had already conceived of Caesar’s Gaul. Along with many others, I happen to believe that the evidence clearly suggests otherwise, and that neither Posidonius nor any other Greek writer we know of prior to Caesar defined *Gallia* the way he does at the beginning of the *Gallic War*; and I review the evidence and the scholarship in a recent article.^[15] In any case, here as elsewhere, I was left with the impression that a complicated question received much less than the necessary attention needed to address it.

Despite its verve, I cannot, therefore, recommend this latest contribution to the mythification of Vercingétorix.

NOTES

[1] Propertius, *Elegies*, ed. and trans. G. P. Goold. Loeb Classical Library 18 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

[2] For a more recent skeptical position see: J. Harmand, “Historiographie d’un mythe. L’invention de Vercingétorix de 1865 à nos jours,” *Storia della Storiografia* 15 (1989): 3-16.

[3] Caesar, *The Gallic War*, ed. and trans. H.L. Jones (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931-1954); Strabo, *The Geography*, ed. and trans. H.J. Edwards (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[4] Suetonius, *Divus Iulius* 25, in *Suetonius*, trans. J.C. Rolfe; introduction by K.R. Bradley (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

[5] Quintilian, *The Institutio Oratoria*, trans. H. E. Butler (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1921-22).

[6] Matthias Gelzer, “Vercingetorix,” in *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Band VIII A.1 (Stuttgart: Metzlersche Verlag, 1955), pp. 981-1008. Yann Le Bohec, “Vercingétorix” *Rivista Storica dell’Antichità* 28 (1998): 85-120.

[7] Camille Jullian’s biography merits special mention: *Vercingétorix*, ed. and preface Paul-Marie Duval (Paris: Tallandier, 1977) (the original appeared in 1901).

[8] On the anachronistic accoutrements, see Joël Le Gall, “Cent ans après. Un témoin méconnu de l’histoire du Second Empire, la statue de Vercingétorix sur le Mont Auxois,” *Mémoires de l’Académie des Sciences, Arts et Belles-Lettres de Dijon* 117 (1970): 199-219, 207ff.

[9] Quoted from Le Gall, p. 199; the italics are mine.

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- [10] Le Bohec, "Vercingétorix," p. 98.
- [11] Cicero, *On Old Age, On Friendship, On Divination*, trans. William Armistead Falconer (Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 2014).
- [12] Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, trans. Earnest Cary and Herbert B. Foster (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1914-27).
- [13] *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* 7.49.
- [14] See J. Guey, A. Audin, "L'amphithéâtre des trois-Gaules à Lyon," *Gallia* 22 (1964): 37-61; esp. 46-7.
- [15] Christopher B. Krebs, "The World's Measure: Caesar's geographies of Gallia and Britannia in their contexts and as evidence of his world map," *American Journal of Philology* 139/1 (2018): 93-122; esp. 96-102.

Christopher B. Krebs
Stanford University
cbkrebs@stanford.edu

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