

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-58610-9 - Caesar: As Man of Letters
 F. E. Adcock
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INTRODUCTION

WHEN Caesar set out for Gaul in March 58 B.C. (at an age when Alexander was dead and Napoleon defeated)¹ he was Pontifex Maximus and a consular, a governor of two provinces, a general with a small army which might be increased at need. He had been an adventurous politician, who had evaded or surmounted the dangers that beset the advance to high office of a man whose early connexions had been suspect, who had been a spendthrift, a fashionable gallant, not made respectable by bribing his way to the headship of the State religion. He had displayed force as an orator and dexterity in intrigue. He had achieved some military success as propraetor in Spain and repaired his fortune which had hitherto needed the support of the great financier Crassus repaid by political services. A timely adherence to Pompey, who had been alienated by the ill will of the influential aristocrats who served and were served by the convention of Senatorial government, had given him the opportunity of reconciling Crassus and Pompey in a coalition in which he was a partner, but hardly a partner on equal terms. They had procured for him election to the consulship in which

¹ G. Boissier, *Cicéron et ses amis*, p. 242.

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[More information](#)

CAESAR AS MAN OF LETTERS

he had served their interests and his own, while at the same time finding scope for some practical reforms in the control of provincial government. The drastic use of his position and of the forces at the disposal of the coalition had broken through conventional hindrances and he had openly exulted at the helplessness of his enemies. As proconsul of Cisalpine Gaul he was to have an army to act as the military reserve of the coalition for the next few years. Then the province of Transalpine Gaul had fallen vacant and had been added to his command, so that his ambition now had a wider scope. It would be possible for him to gather to himself a following of soldiers as his *legati*, to find a post for the son of Crassus and employment for the talents of Labienus, who was probably a *protégé* of Pompey. But when all was added together, Caesar had not, so far, achieved the eminence that is attributed to him by the biographical tradition that has anticipated his future greatness.

During the good fighting season of eight years Caesar was campaigning beyond the Alps. In most winters he was engaged in the duties of a governor in Northern Italy, duties which to a man of his power of rapid work would leave him time to write an account of his campaigns if he wished to do so.

He would be in touch with the course of political events in Rome, and when the coalition was in danger of breaking up early in 56 B.C., he was able to meet his political allies in conferences at Ravenna

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[More information](#)

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and Luca, and it may be assumed that his tact was efficacious in removing the jealous distrust which haunted the relations of Pompey and Crassus. His dispatches to the Senate, more voluminous, it seems, than was usual, were read in the Curia and were no doubt talked about in aristocratic circles. The thanksgivings that were voted would advertise the victories they celebrated. When Cicero delivered his speech *On the Consular Provinces* in 56 he assumed that the Senators knew roughly what Caesar had achieved. There was a lively correspondence between Caesar himself and his officers and other friends at Rome, and it is possible that men in his confidence visited Rome and were visited by Romans. Roman opinion and Caesar were thus not without contact with each other. But it is probable, though it is not certain, that Caesar did not publish his *Commentaries* year by year, even if, as seems at least likely, he wrote them year by year (see below, pp. 77 ff.). Then, probably late in 51 or early in 50, the first seven books of the *Gallic War* were published describing Caesar's *res gestae* in Gaul to the fall of Alesia, the crowning mercy which removed the last resistance that could hope to defeat outright his purposes. What followed in the two years after Alesia was left to be described by Hirtius, a member of his staff who enjoyed his confidence.

Had the Civil War not broken out, Caesar's seven *Commentaries* would justify his claim to a triumph, his election as consul and possibly the conferring on

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him of a second great command as proconsul. As it was, they had placed on record the fact that he had deserved better of the Republic than to be denied the satisfaction of his ambition. Whatever the outcome of Caesar's invasion of Italy, his *res gestae* in Gaul had been placed above dispute. But, after a long-drawn crisis at Rome, Caesar had to resort to war to make good his claims, matching his own genius and his own army against the power of the Republic so far as this lay in the hands of his enemies. The three books of the *Civil War* reveal a Caesar who was determined to have his way. During the two years that are described, Caesar was at pains to justify himself and was prepared to seek an end to what he calls a *civilis dissensio*, provided he was placed above any danger from his enemies and any disappointment of his ambitions. It may seem to us that Caesar's greatness and the continuance of the aristocratic Republic ruled each other out, that the State was already what Caesar was to call 'a phantom without substance'. During his years in Gaul his single will had prevailed, and when he returned to Rome in 47 B.C. he was more prepared to pardon his enemies and reward his friends than to place himself on a level with the Senate and People of Rome. He was a dictator as Sulla had been, but he presently declared that Sulla had been an innocent (*litteras nescisse*) when he abdicated. It is, as will be seen, disputable when the three books of these *Commentaries* were published,

INTRODUCTION

but it is at least very probable that they were written when Caesar was not yet determined to set a personal autocracy, or, as many suppose, a Hellenistic monarchy, in the place of the traditional Republic. He had crossed the Rubicon, but he had not crossed the watershed that divides an *imperator* of the Roman Republic from an Emperor of Rome. The *Civil War* should then be read as, above all, the work of a man fighting for his life and his career, whatever more distant visions of statesmanship may have haunted his dreams.

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I

THE LITERARY FORM

THE extant continuous writings of Caesar were entitled *C. Iuli Caesaris commentarii rerum gestarum*. After the researches of F. W. Kelsey,¹ this seems to be beyond doubt, and it has not been seriously doubted. What we possess must have been contained in nine rolls—the first seven books of the *Gallic War*, covering the years 58–52 B.C. being rolls I–VII; then roll IX—the first two books of the *Civil War* covering the year 49; and roll X the third book of the *Civil War* describing the events of 48 B.C. until the narrative breaks off late in that year. Between roll VII and roll IX there lay the eighth book of the *Gallic War*, written by Hirtius, and the series of commentaries in the Caesarian Corpus was completed by the addition of three rolls containing the *Bellum Alexandrinum*, the *Bellum Africum* or *Africanum*, and *Bellum Hispaniense*. The whole series thus describes the military achievements of Caesar from the moment he arrived in Gaul in 58 B.C. to his victory over the younger Cn. Pompeius in 45 B.C. and its immediate consequences. Caesar's authorship of rolls I–VII, IX and X was no secret in his own times and it is hard to believe that

¹ 'The title of Caesar's Work', *Trans. Amer. Phil. Assoc.* xxxvi (1905), pp. 211–38.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE LITERARY FORM

it was ever concealed. They reveal at first hand the mind of the man whose exploits they describe, and it must have been at once plain that no one else can have written them. The theme of Caesar's commentaries is his *res gestae* whether in Gaul or in the theatres of war of that part of the *Bellum Civile*—or, as Caesar called it, the *civilis dissensio*—of which he himself wrote. By the time of Suetonius a distinction was made between Caesar's account of events in Gaul and his account of the Civil War, but, primarily, the simple description of the theme was *res gestae*.

A *commentarius* was a form of composition that already had a long history. The word corresponds in Latin to the Greek word *hypomnema*, which may be translated *aide-mémoire*, and the Greek word and its Latin equivalent are used of written matter that serves the purpose of an *aide-mémoire*. The origin of such writings is, primarily, official or private, and it is found in the times of Alexander the Great and his successors, an inheritance from the practice of Oriental monarchies so far as it was not the natural product of administrative convenience. On the military side, *hypomnemata* might be the war-diaries of generals, dispatches and reports such as have been found in a papyrus of the reign of Ptolemy VIII. In civil administration they may be memoranda or bureaucratic records. They may be Court journals in the Hellenistic kingdoms and so on. They are not, to begin with, intended for publication. In private life they may be written material

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[More information](#)

CAESAR AS MAN OF LETTERS

for speeches—at least the word ‘commentarius’ is used in Cicero of the notes for a speech—or they may be private papers and memoranda. Thus Caelius¹ sends to Cicero, then governing Cilicia, a ‘commentarius rerum urbanarum’ which contains a catalogue of events at Rome for Cicero’s information. Not all of it, Caelius implies, is worth Cicero’s attention: ‘ex quo tu quae digna sunt selige’. So far, it may be said that *hypomnemata* or *commentarii* are, in general, statements of facts for their own sake, so far as they are not just helps to memory; though, inevitably, they may contain the facts as they are discerned by their authors. Such are *commentarii* in their origin. Literary merit is not their concern. They should be precise and clear, or they would defeat their own purpose, and that is all.

In contrast to these there is *historia*. To the Romans, of Caesar’s day and afterwards, *historia* was, above all, an achievement of literary art. It is to Quintilian ‘proxima poetis et quodammodo carmen solutum’.² The author of a work of *historia* was, above all, a stylist: what he regarded as fine writing was his chief aim, and not the discovery of truth. This does not mean that his work should not be credible or sincere—Livy is sincere even when he cannot be judged credible—but the merit of *historia* and the merit of establishing truth of fact are not one merit but two. The ‘brevitas’ of Sallust, ‘primus Romana Crispus in historia’,³ is

¹ *ad Fam.* VIII, 11, 4. ² *Inst. Or.* x, 1, 31. ³ Martial, XIV, 191, 2.

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[More information](#)

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unlike enough to the 'lactea ubertas' of Livy, but what they are both concerned with, above all, is the same thing, a literary achievement.

Between *commentarius* of the original type and *historia* there is room for something which is not quite either the one or the other, something more than the first in content and less than the second in style. It is a development of the *commentarius*, and it is, as has been well observed,¹ something more Roman than Greek. This intermediate stage had been attained before the time of Caesar. Commentaries of this kind may be the material which the writer of *historia* can take and transmute by the alchemy of his literary art. This had been realized as will be seen presently, and it finds a place in Lucian's essay *Quomodo historia scribenda est*.² Such a *commentarius* of the intermediate stage may have absorbed or digested *commentarii* of the original type, or worked them together into a narrative which is not yet *historia* but has attained that synoptic view of events which Polybius claimed to have achieved. It is a natural process, and it is natural that it should be applied by the person most concerned with the events it describes. But it remains a *commentarius* until the man of letters converts it into *historia*. Though the author of the *commentarius* may describe things from his own standpoint, it still purports to be a statement of the facts for their own sake.

¹ By F. Jacoby, *Die Fragm. der griech. Historiker*, II D, pp. 639f.

² 48ff.

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[More information](#)

CAESAR AS MAN OF LETTERS

The development of the commentary to be the material of *historia* may conveniently be illustrated from a letter written by Lucius Verus to his tutor, Fronto.¹ The letter was written in A.D. 165, but the practical and psychological processes are near enough to those of the last decades of the Republic. Verus had been the nominal architect of a victory over the Parthians, though the strategical plan had been devised by Marcus Aurelius and had been executed by two able generals, Avidius Cassius and Martius Verus. Lucius Verus, a prince in search of a panegyrist, writes to Fronto to say he is forwarding the dispatches of his subordinates and has directed the two generals to draw up *commentarii* describing their operations for Fronto's use. He then offers to prepare a *commentarius* of his own in whatever form his tutor suggests. 'I am ready', he says, 'to fall in with your suggestions, provided my exploits are put by you in a bright light. Of course you will not overlook my *orationes* to the Senate and *adlocutiones* to my army.' Thus Fronto will have material for the speeches that were an adornment of *historia*. 'My *res gestae*', Verus concludes, 'whatever their character, are of course no greater than they actually are, but they will appear to be as great as you wish them to appear to be.' Fronto did not refuse this naïve request, and there have survived some fragmentary specimens of the preamble to the *historia*, which he probably did not

¹ In *ad Verum Imp.* II, 3.