

Judging them by their enemies: Alexander & the Persians Caesar & the Gauls



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The nature of the sources for Alexander

“It has been well said that the search for the historical Alexander is something like the search for the historical Jesus. Many contemporaries had an interest in preserving a version of what he said and did, but none of the subject’s actual words has been certainly preserved verbatim.” Paul Cartledge, *Alexander the Great: the Hunt for a New Past*, 2004, p. 244

Detail of the Alexander Mosaic from the House of the Faun, Pompeii, c. 100 BC



Ancient sources on Alexander

Callisthenes, nephew of Aristotle; “court historian”; executed 327 BC

Aristobulus, Macedonian officer, after 301 BC

Ptolemy I, Companion, general, Successor; ruled Egypt 323-282 BC

Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, Book 17; mid 1st century BC

Quintus Curtius Rufus, *History of Alexander*; mid 1st century AD

Plutarch of Chaeronea, *Lives of Alexander & Julius Caesar*, *On the Great Fortune or Virtue of Alexander*; 1st-2nd centuries AD

Arrian of Nicomedia, *Anabasis of Alexander*; mid 2nd century AD



Bust of Ptolemy I,
Louvre, Paris



Statue of Plutarch
from Chaeronea

Arrian on the battle of Issus (333 BC)

“The Persian army was in plain sight, yet Alexander still moved slowly, for to advance too quickly might have disrupted his lines and caused a break to develop in the phalanx; but, once they were within missile range, Alexander, at the head of his own right wing galloped into the river. Speed was now of the essence, as a swift attack would shake the enemy and the sooner they closed ranks with them the less damage would be done by the Persian archers. Everything happened as Alexander had expected: the Persian left gave way as soon as his attack reached them, handing a brilliant victory to Alexander and the men with him.”

Arrian, Anabasis of Alexander 2.10

“As for Darius, as soon as his left wing was panicked by Alexander and he saw it being broken away from the rest of the army, there and then, just as he was, still in his chariot, he set off in flight, one of the first to flee. As long as he had level ground for his escape he could stay safe in his chariot, but when the ground became too rough and broken he abandoned his chariot, leaving behind his shield and king's robe, and even his bow in the chariot, and continued his flight on horseback. Only the imminent onset of night saved him from capture by Alexander.”

Arrian, Anabasis of Alexander 2.11

Alexander and Darius at Issus



Mosaic from the House of the Faun, Pompeii, c. 100 BC; Naples Archaeological Museum; possibly copied from a painting of the late 4th century BC

Plutarch's approach to biography

My subject in this book is the life of Alexander, the king, and of Julius Caesar, the conqueror of Pompey. The careers of these men embrace such a multitude of events that my preamble shall consist of nothing more than this one plea: if I do not record all their most celebrated achievements, or describe any of them exhaustively, but merely summarize for the most part what they accomplished, I ask my readers not to regard this as a fault. For I am writing biography, not history, and the truth is that the most brilliant exploits often tell us nothing of the virtues or vices of the men who performed them, while on the other hand a chance remark or a joke may reveal far more of a man's character than the mere feat of winning battles in which thousands fall, or of marshalling great armies, or laying siege to cities. *Plutarch, Lives of Alexander and Julius Caesar, chapter 1*

Why Macedonians are better than Persians

Alexander now noticed that his Companions had acquired thoroughly luxurious habits and had become vulgar in the extravagance of their way of living... When his friends bathed they often anointed themselves with myrrh, rather than with plain oil, and were attended by masseurs and body-servants. Alexander reasoned with them and gently reproved them for these excesses. He told them that he was amazed to see that men who had fought and conquered in such great battles could have forgotten that those who labour sleep more sweetly than those who are laboured for. Could they not understand, when they compared their style of living with that of the Persians, that there is nothing more slavish than the love of pleasure and nothing more princely than the life of toil? How can a man attend to his horse, he asked them, or keep his spear and his helmet clean and bright, if he has lost the habit of using his hands to look after his own precious body? Did they not know that the end and perfection of conquest is to avoid doing the same things as the conquered have done?. *Plutarch, Alexander 40.*

Sources on Julius Caesar

Cicero, *Letters & Speeches*

Caesar, *Gallic War*; *Civil War*

Sallust (86-35 BC), *Conspiracy of Catiline*

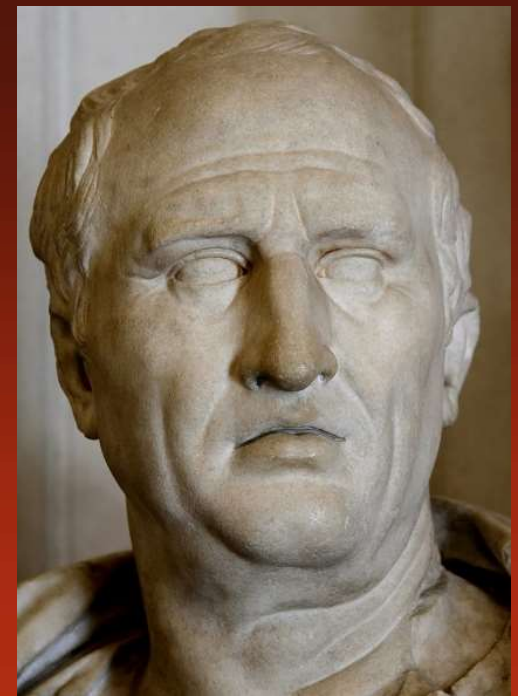
Velleius Paterculus, *Roman History*, AD 30

Plutarch, *Lives of Crassus, Pompey, Cicero, Caesar, Cato, Antony*, 1st-2nd century AD

Suetonius, *Life of the Deified Julius Caesar*, c. AD 130

Appian *Civil Wars*, mid 2nd century AD

Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, early 3rd century AD



Bust of Cicero,
Capitoline Museums,
Rome



Bust of Caesar, Altes Museum, Berlin

Caesar in the Letters of Cicero

“With Caesar either it must be war to the death or we must let him stand for the consulship. Better war than slavery – so you will say. But war for what? Proscription if you’re beaten, and if you win slavery just the same. What then am I going to do? ...As the strayed ox joins the herd, so I will join the best men (*optimates*), or those who are so-called. I can see plainly what is the best course in these sorry times. For nobody can be sure what will happen once the fighting starts, but anyone can see that if the best men are beaten Caesar will be no more merciful than Cinna in the slaughter of leading men, and as greedy in plundering the rich as Sulla was.”

Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 130; Dec. 50 BC

“I am so pleased that you (Cornelius Balbus & Gaius Oppius) indicate in your letter how much you approve what I did at Corfinum. I shall gladly follow your advice, all the more so because I had already decided to do this, and to appear as lenient as possible, and to make every effort to reconcile with Pompey. Let us try in this way to win back everyone’s good will and enjoy a lasting victory. For others have not been able, by cruelty, to avoid incurring hatred, or to hold onto their success for long, except for Lucius Sulla, and I am not about to follow his example. Let this be the new style of conquest, to make mercy and generosity our shield.”

Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 174C; March 49 BC

O Caesar, save us from the Germans!

“His second campaign was fought directly against the Germans in defence of Gaul, even though previously, in Rome, he had entered into an alliance with the German king Ariovistus (as consul in 59 BC; *Gallic War* 1.40, 44). But their conduct towards their neighbours, who were subjects of Caesar’s, was intolerable, and it was generally believed that if the opportunity presented itself they would not stay peaceably where they were, but would spread into Gaul and take it over.” **Plutarch, Caesar 19**

“And yet, he continued, a worse fate had befallen the victorious Sequani than the defeated Aedui. For Ariovistus, the king of the Germans, had settled in their territory and seized one third of their land, which was the best in the whole of Gaul...This Ariovistus was a savage (*barbarus*), a reckless hothead, and they could endure his dictates no longer. Unless Caesar and the Roman people could help, the whole of Gaul would have to do what the Helvetii had done – leave their homes and seek out another place to dwell in, far away from the Germans, and to risk whatever fortune might befall.” **Caesar *Gallic War* 1.31**

“In fact, said Ariovistus, if he killed Caesar he would earn the gratitude of many aristocrats and leaders at Rome. He knew this for a fact from those very men, through their messengers, and by Caesar’s death he could win the favour of them all. If, on the other hand, Caesar departed and handed over full control of Gaul to him, he would give him a great reward; and whatever wars he wanted waged, these could be accomplished without any effort or risk on Caesar’s part.” **Caesar *Gallic War* 1.44**

Everybody wants to rule the world

“Caesar’s policy was to reconcile Pompey and Crassus, the two most influential men in the city. But by getting them to settle their differences and become friends, he channelled power away from them and onto himself, and so used this apparently altruistic act gradually to bring about a revolution in Rome. For the usual view, that the civil wars were caused by the quarrel between Caesar and Pompey is wrong: it was their friendship that was responsible. First they collaborated to overthrow the aristocracy, and only then did they fall out with each other.” **Plutarch, Caesar, 13**

“Because of his popularity and open-handed generosity, Dumnorix was extremely powerful among the Sequani. He was also a friend to the Helvetii, for it was from them that he had taken a wife – Orgetorix’s daughter. Spurred on by his eagerness to be king, Dumnorix supported revolution. He also wanted, by services rendered, to put as many states as possible in debt to him. **Caesar, Gallic War, 1.9**

- Dumnorix helps the Helvetii cross Sequani territory
- Leads the Aeduan cavalry allied to Caesar
- Betrays the Romans in battle
- Is spared on his brother Diviciacus’ request
- Refuses to go to Britain in 54 BC and is killed

Silver coin of Dumnorix c. 60 BC; warrior holding battle standard and head; DUBNOREIX



Vercingetorix - It takes one to know one

“Although many tribes were involved in the uprising, the most conspicuous were the Arverni and the Carnutes, and overall responsibility for the war was given to Vergentorix, whose father had been put to death by the Gauls for his apparently tyrannical plans.” *Plutarch, Caesar 25*

“There an Arvernian called Vercingetorix acted in a similar fashion. He was the son of Celtillus, and his father had won dominion over the whole of Gaul; for this reason, namely trying to gain a kingdom, Celtillus had been put to death by the state.” *Caesar, Gallic War 7.4*

“Still he persisted, and held a levy of the poorest and the most desperate in the open countryside instead. Once he had assembled a large force, he exiled the opponents who so recently had expelled him. Vercingetorix was now proclaimed king by his supporters... The supreme command was conferred on him with unanimous approval. After winning this position of command, he demanded hostages from all these peoples, and ordered them to send him a specified number of soldiers at once. He decreed that each state must produce a given number of weapons before a certain date, and paid particular attention to the cavalry. In his command he combined extreme conscientiousness with extreme severity.”

Caesar, Gallic War 7.4



Gold coin of
Vercingetorix c. 52 BC;
Head of a god:
Belenos? Apollo?
VERCINGETO[RIX]

The victor and the vanquished

“The following day Vercingetorix called a council and argued that he had undertaken this war not in his own interests but for the liberty of all. Since they were forced to yield to fortune, he went on, he was putting himself in their hands, ready for either outcome, whether they wanted to make reparation to the Romans by putting him to death, or to hand him over alive... Caesar took his seat within the fortifications in front of his camp, and the ringleaders were brought to him there. Vercingetorix was handed over and weapons were thrown down. Caesar had the Aedui and Arverni kept back, in case he could use them to win back their state's allegiance, and the rest of the prisoners he shared out as booty, one apiece, to his entire army.”

Caesar, *Gallic War* 7.89



**Silver denarius minted for
Caesar's troops 48-47 BC**



Vercingetorix and Caesar



Painting by Lionel Royer, 1899; based on the description of Vercingetorix's surrender in Plutarch, *Caesar* 27