

**ROMAN GAUL /  
FRANCE (50 BCE - 486  
CE): THE GALLIC WARS**



# ROMAN GAUL / FRANCE (50 BCE - 486 CE): THE GALLIC WARS

## Description

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources including excerpts from Caesar's own writings on the Gallic Wars, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain why Julius Caesar and the Roman Army invaded the Gallic lands (today's modern France) in 58 BCE, how the Romans were able to win the Gallic Wars and eventually incorporate Gaul into the ever-expanding Roman Republic, and how Caesar sought to use his victories in the Gallic Wars as a springboard to greater glory in Rome.

## Subjects

European History  
World History  
Anthropology

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Vercingetorix Statue, Clermont-Ferrand
- Museum Crozatier, Auvergne
- Museum Calvet, Avignon
- Various Roman Ruins in France
- Nimes Amphitheatre
- Grand Roman Theatre, Lyon
- National Archaeological Museum

## Essential Questions

- Why did Julius Caesar and the Roman Army invade Gaul, France?
- Why was Caesar successful in the Gallic Wars? How was he able to use the Gallic Wars as a stepping stone to greater power in Rome?
- How did the Romans subdue the Gallic tribes?
- Who was Vercingetorix? What role did he play in the Gallic Wars?



## Academic Summary

All Gaul is divided into three parts, one of which the Belgae inhabit, the Aquitani another, those who in their own language are called Celts, in our Gauls, the third. All these differ from each other in language, customs and laws. The river Garonne separates the Gauls from the Aquitani; the Marne and the Seine separate them from the Belgae. Of all these, the Belgae are the bravest, because they are furthest from the civilization and refinement of [our] Province, and merchants least frequently resort to them, and import those things which tend to effeminate the mind; and they are the nearest to the Germans, who dwell beyond the Rhine, with whom they are continually waging war; for which reason the Helvetii also surpass the rest of the Gauls in valor, as they contend with the Germans in almost daily battles, when they either repel them from their own territories, or themselves wage war on their frontiers. One part of these, which it has been said that the Gauls occupy, takes its beginning at the river Rhone; it is bounded by the river Garonne, the ocean, and the territories of the Belgae; it borders, too, on the side of the Sequani and the Helvetii, upon the river Rhine, and stretches toward the north. The Belgae rises from the extreme frontier of Gaul, extend to the lower part of the river Rhine; and look toward the north and the rising sun. Aquitania extends from the river Garonne to the Pyrenean Mountains and to that part of the ocean which is near Spain: it looks between the setting of the sun, and the North Star.

*Julius Caesar, Book 1, Chapter 1 of Notebooks about the Gallic Wars, approx. 50 BCE*

But when he heard that the Belgae, who were the most powerful of the Gauls and occupied the third part of all their country, had revolted, and had assembled unknown myriads of armed men, he turned back at once and marched thither with great speed. He fell upon the enemy as they were plundering the Gauls that were in alliance with Rome, and so routed and destroyed the least scattered and most numerous of them, after a disgraceful struggle on their part, that the Romans could cross lakes and deep rivers for the multitude of dead bodies in them. All the rebels who dwelt along the ocean submitted without a battle; against the Nervii, however, the most savage and warlike of the people in these parts, Caesar led his forces. The Nervii, who dwelt in dense woods, and had placed their families and possessions in a recess of the forest at farthest remove from the enemy, at a time when Caesar was fortifying a camp and did not expect the battle, fell upon him suddenly, sixty thousand strong. They routed his cavalry, and surrounded the seventh and twelfth legions and slew all their centurions, 8 and had not Caesar snatched a shield, made his way through the combatants in front of him, and hurled himself upon the Barbarians; and had not the tenth legion, at sight of his peril, run down from the heights and cut the ranks of the enemy to pieces, not a Roman, it is thought, would have survived. As it was, however, owing to Caesar's daring, they fought beyond their powers, as the saying is, and even then did not rout the Nervii, but cut them down as they defended themselves; for out of sixty thousand only five hundred are said to have come off alive, and only three of their senators out of four hundred.

... however, the most of the Barbarians who escaped at that time took refuge with their king in the city of Alesia. And while Caesar was besieging

this city, which was thought to be impregnable by reason of the great size of its walls and the number of their defenders, there fell upon him from outside the city a peril too great for words to depict. For all that was mightiest among the nations of Gaul assembled and came in arms to Alesia, three hundred thousand strong; and the number of fighting men inside the city was not less than a hundred and seventy thousand. Thus Caesar, caught between so large hostile forces and besieged there, was compelled to build two walls for his protection, one looking towards the city, and the other towards those who had come up to relieve it; he felt that if the two forces should unite his cause was wholly lost.

For many reasons, then, and naturally, Caesar's peril at Alesia was famous, since it produced more deeds of skill and daring than any of his other struggles; but one must be amazed above all that he engaged and conquered so many tens of thousands outside the city without the knowledge of those inside, nay more, without the knowledge even of the Romans who were guarding the wall that faced the city. 6 For these did not learn of the victory until the wailing of the men in Alesia and the lamentations of the women were heard, as they beheld in the quarters of the enemy many shields adorned with gold and silver, many corselets smeared with blood, and also drinking cups and tents of Gallic fashion carried by the Romans into their camp. So quickly did so great a force, like a phantom or a dream, disperse and vanish out of sight, the greater part of them having fallen in the battle. Those who held Alesia, too, after giving themselves and Caesar no small trouble, finally surrendered. And the leader of the whole war, Vergentorix, after putting on his most beautiful armor and decorating his horse, rode out through the gate. He made a circuit around Caesar, who remained seated, and then leaped down from his horse, stripped off his suit of armor, and seating himself at Caesar's feet remained motionless, until he was delivered up to be kept in custody for the triumph.

*Plutarch "The Life of Julius Caesar" in Parallel Lives (approx. 75 CE)*

North of the Alpine Mountains, the land the Romans knew as "Gaul" was a wild, remote and unforgiving land inhabited by barbarian Celtic tribes that possessed little in the way of culture or common sense. According to the Greek stoic writer Posidonius, a traveler who spent time among the Celtic tribes in Gaul in the early days of the 1st century BCE, the men of Gaul were ferocious warriors who nailed human skulls to their doorways as trophies. While the Roman army had fought to expand the Republic's vast holdings around the Mediterranean, Gaul seemed too many to be not worth of the cost or the potential rewards. Most Romans simply wanted no part of the lands north of the Alps. Julius Caesar, however, was different. He saw Gaul as an opportunity, not a misfortune. Imagine the power Caesar would have over his rivals and the Senate if he could conquer the Gallic lands and bring the tribes under Roman control. In response to what he later called an "uprising" that threatened Roman territories north of the Po river, Caesar, who had recently been appointed proconsul of the Republic, crossed the Alps with five Roman legions in 58 BCE. In the first phase of the Gallic Wars, Caesar and his armies fought against many different Celtic/Gallic tribes across the region from the Alps to the Rhine River. Caesar used the lack of unity among the Gallic tribes to his advantage, and within two years the Roman army had control of most of territory that makes up modern France. Caesar felt confident enough in his position in Gaul by 55 BCE to cross the English Channel and attempt an invasion of what the Romans called "Britannia." Caesar

would eventually attempt two invasions of Britain (the second one coming a year after the first had to be abandoned due to weather). Neither would prove ultimately successful, but news of them did keep Caesar's name on everyone's lips in Rome. By late 54 BCE, Caesar, figuring his days in Gaul were over, returned to Italy a hero and conqueror. As long as the Gallic tribes lacked unity, the province was safe from any major uprisings. The Roman legions left in Gaul could handle any minor ones. In 52 BCE, Vercingetorix, king of the Averni, a Gallic tribe living in what is now central France, rallied other tribes in a last gasp offensive against the Roman invaders. After a series of small battles and a strategy that would later be called "scorched earth" trying to deny Caesar's Army of food and supplies, Vercingetorix and his allies settled into a strong defensive position at Gergovia. Caesar's army surrounded the town, but after a short siege followed by a lack of coordination among the Roman legions, the Gallic forces were able to win a pitched battle, forcing Caesar to withdraw or face defeat. It was the low point for Caesar in the Gallic Wars. Caesar was undeterred, however, and figured he would get another chance soon.

That chance would come at Alesia. In September 52 BCE, Vercingetorix occupied the town of Alesia with over 80,000 troops. Caesar's army of around 30,000 surrounded the town and began a siege, trying to starve them out. After a couple of weeks, food shortages in the city made the situation desperate. First, Vercingetorix sent the women and children out of the city hoping to save food for his soldiers. Caesar recognized the ploy and in response, the Gauls decided to attack Caesar's lines, hoping for a breakthrough. Although the battle went back and forth for a time, eventually, with Caesar personally rallying his troops, the Romans were able to carry the day. Facing starvation and low morale, Vercingetorix finally surrendered to Caesar, ending the Gallic Wars. Rome would rule Gaul for over 500 years. Roman culture blended with Gallic (and later Frankish) culture to provide the foundation for French culture.

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources including excerpts from Caesar's own writings on the Gallic Wars, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain why Julius Caesar and the Roman Army invaded the Gallic lands (today's modern France) in 58 BCE, how the Romans were able to win the Gallic Wars and eventually incorporate Gaul into the ever-expanding Roman Republic, and how Caesar sought to use his victories in the Gallic Wars as a springboard to greater glory in Rome.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain why Julius Caesar and the Roman Army invaded the Gallic lands (today's modern France) in 58 BCE.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how the Romans were able to win the Gallic Wars and eventually incorporate Gaul into the ever expanding Roman Republic.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how Caesar sought to use his victories in the Gallic Wars as a springboard to greater glory in Rome.

# Procedures

## I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Did the Roman Republic expand too much, too quickly? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

## II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Julius Caesar and the Gallic Commentaries (20 min)
- Video – The Battle of Alesia – Caesar’s Greatest Triumph (20 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on the Gallic War and Roman Gaul, taking notes as appropriate. (15 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles/photographs to each group.
- Suggestion: AP/Advanced students should focus on primary sources.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion – Why did the Romans invade Gaul in 58 BCE? How were the Romans able to win the Gallic Wars? How did Caesar hope to use the Gallic Wars as a springboard to greater power for himself in the Republic? (15 min)

## III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail why Julius Caesar and the Roman Army invaded the Gallic lands (today’s modern France) in 58 BCE, how the Romans were able to win the Gallic Wars and eventually incorporate Gaul into the ever-expanding Roman Republic, and how Caesar sought to use his victories in the Gallic Wars as a springboard to greater glory in Rome.

## Extension

### On tour: Ancient Theatre of Fourvière, Lyon

While on tour in Lyon, students will visit the Grand Roman Theatre in the district of Fourvière, where they can see for themselves one of the best-preserved examples of Roman architecture in France. The area is the site of the original settlement in what was called Lugdunum by the Romans. In the years following Caesar’s return to Rome, the Romans designated Lyon as Gaul’s provincial capital. In the same section of the city, students can also see the ruins of roman baths and a Gallo-Roman Museum.

# Web Links

## Lesson Plan Websites

- [penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Caesar\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Caesar*.html)  
The Life of Julius Caesar (primary source) – from Plutarch’s Parallel Lives
- [classics.mit.edu/Caesar/gallic.html](http://classics.mit.edu/Caesar/gallic.html)  
The Gallic Wars by Julius Caesar (primary source). 7-book primary account of the Gallic Wars from Caesar himself. This source is the best information we have on the Gallic Wars, although student need to realize that the work is biased and was written to make Caesar look good. Book #8 was written by one of Caesar’s lieutenants after Caesar returned to Rome.
- [www.livius.org/caa-can/caesar/caesar05.html](http://www.livius.org/caa-can/caesar/caesar05.html)  
The Reconquest of Gaul (website) – from Livius.org articles on ancient history
- [www.heritage-history.com/www/heritage.php?Dir=wars&FileName=wars\\_gallic.php](http://www.heritage-history.com/www/heritage.php?Dir=wars&FileName=wars_gallic.php)  
Roman Conquest of Gaul (website) – from Heritage History
- [autocww.colorado.edu/~toldy2/E64ContentFiles/AncientHistory/gaul.htm](http://autocww.colorado.edu/~toldy2/E64ContentFiles/AncientHistory/gaul.htm)  
Gaul (website)
- [www.thelatinlibrary.com/historians/notes/gaul.html](http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/historians/notes/gaul.html)  
Gaul (website)
- [www.ancientworlds.net/aw/Article/165414#1](http://www.ancientworlds.net/aw/Article/165414#1)  
A Part of Caesar’s Triumph: Vercingetorix (website)
- [www.slideshare.net/jtretter/julius-caesar-and-the-gallic-commentaries](http://www.slideshare.net/jtretter/julius-caesar-and-the-gallic-commentaries)  
Julius Caesar and the Gallic commentaries (PowerPoint)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=bty\\_o-iS0Ls](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bty_o-iS0Ls)  
The Battle of Alesia – Caesar’s Greatest Triumph (video). This 40-minute video is perhaps too long for many in-class showings, but it is well worth it. It does a great job of explaining the different sides and strategies at the battle, and is highly recommended for students and teachers, especially AP/Advanced ones studying the period.

## Background Information

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman\\_Gaul](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Gaul)  
Roman Gaul – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gallic\\_Wars](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gallic_Wars)  
Gallic Wars – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Alesia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Alesia)  
Battle of Alesia – Wikipedia article
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/france/country\\_profile](http://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/france/country_profile)  
On the Road: France (country profile) – from Passports Educational Travel
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/france/nimes](http://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/france/nimes)  
On the Road: Nimes – from Passports Educational Travel



## Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/roman-britannia](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/roman-britannia)  
Roman Britain – An Overview
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/roman-britain-hadrians-wall](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/roman-britain-hadrians-wall)  
Roman Britain – Hadrian's Wall
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/roman-empire-nero-and-the-great-fire-64CE](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/roman-empire-nero-and-the-great-fire-64CE)  
Roman Empire – Great Fire of Rome 64 CE
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/roman-empire-pompeii-eruption](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/roman-empire-pompeii-eruption)  
Roman Empire – Pompeii 79 CE
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/roman-empire-pompeii-villa-of-the-mysteries](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/roman-empire-pompeii-villa-of-the-mysteries)  
Roman Empire – Pompeii: Villa of the Mysteries
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/roman-empire-pax-romana](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/roman-empire-pax-romana)  
Roman Empire – Pax Romana: Roman Peace 27 BCE – 180 CE
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/roman-republic-punic-wars](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/roman-republic-punic-wars)  
Roman Republic – Punic Wars: Expansion of the Republic

## Key Terms

- Barbarians
- Caesar
- Frontier
- Gaul
- Roman Republic
- Siege
- Unity

