

From Gallic Wars, by Julius Caesar—Book V, Chapters 12-25 (c. 52 BC)

Caesar defeats Cassivellaunus and the native Britons and crosses the Thames (west of London)
54 BC

12 The inland part of Britain is inhabited by tribes declared in their own tradition to be indigenous to the island, the maritime part by tribes that migrated at an earlier time from Belgium to seek booty by invasion. Nearly all of these latter are called after the names of the states from which they sprang when they went to Britain; and after the invasion they abode there and began to till the fields. The population is innumerable; the farm-buildings are found very close together, being very like those of the Gauls; and there is great store of cattle. They use either bronze, or gold coins, or instead of coined money tallies of iron, of a certain standard of weight. In the midland districts of Britain tin is produced, in the maritime iron, but of that there is only a small supply; the bronze they use is imported. There is timber of every kind, as in Gaul, save beech and pine. They account it wrong to eat of hare, fowl, and goose; but these they keep for pastime or pleasure. The climate is more temperate than in Gaul, the cold seasons more moderate.

13 The natural shape of the island is triangular, and one side lies opposite to Gaul. Of this side one angle, which is in Kent (where almost all the ships from Gaul come in to land), faces the east, the lower angle faces south. This side stretches about five hundred miles. The second side bears towards Spain and the west, in which direction lies Ireland, smaller by one half, as it is thought, than Britain; the sea-passage is of equal length to that from Gaul to Britain. Here in mid-channel is an island called Man; in addition, several smaller islands are supposed to lie close to land, as touching which some have written that in midwinter night there lasts for thirty whole days. We could discover nothing about this by inquiries; but, by exact water measurements, we observed that the nights were shorter than on the Continent. The length of this side, according to the belief of the natives, is seven hundred miles. The third side bears northwards, and has no land confronting it; the angle, however, of that side faces on the way towards Germany. The side is supposed to be eight hundred miles long. Thus the whole island is two thousand miles in circumference.

14 Of all the Britons the inhabitants of Kent, an entirely maritime district, are by far the most civilised, differing but little from the Gallic manner of life. Of the inlanders most do not sow corn, but live on milk and flesh and clothe themselves in skins. All the Britons, indeed, dye themselves with woad, which produces a blue colour, and makes their appearance in battle more terrible. They wear long hair, and shave every part of the body save the head and the upper lip. Groups of ten or twelve men have wives together in common, and particularly brothers along with brothers, and fathers with sons; but the children born of the unions are reckoned to belong to the particular house to which the maiden was first conducted.

15 The horsemen and charioteers of the enemy engaged in fierce conflict with our cavalry on the march, with the result, however, that our troops proved their superiority in all respects, and drove them into the woods and highlands; but, pursuing too eagerly after slaying several of the enemy, they lost some of their own number. After an interval, however, when our troops were off their guard and engaged in entrenching the camp, the enemy suddenly dashed out from the woods, and

charging the detachments on outpost duty in advance of the camp, they fought fiercely. And though Caesar sent up two cohorts in support — and those the first cohorts of two legions — and two detachments had taken post with a very slight interval between them, the enemy most gallantly broke through in the middle (as our troops were disconcerted by the novel kind of fighting), and retired safely from the field. On that day a tribune, Quintus Laberius Durus, was killed. The enemy were driven back when more cohorts had been sent up.

16 The action took place in front of the camp and under the eyes of all; and it was clear that in all such fighting our infantry, by reason of their heavy armament, since they could neither pursue a retiring enemy nor venture far from the standards, were but poorly fitted for an enemy of this kind. It was clear, again, that our cavalry fought with great risk, because the enemy often retired of deliberate purpose, and, when they had separated our horse a little from the legions, leapt down from their chariots and fought on foot to our disadvantage. Their cavalry tactics, however, threatened us with exactly the same danger in retirement or pursuit. Add to this that the enemy never fought in close array, but in small parties with wide intervals; and had detachments posted at regular stations, so that one party covered another in turn, and fresh, unspent warriors took the place of the battle-weary.

17 Next day the enemy took post on the hills, at a distance from the camp, and began to show themselves in small parties and to assail our horsemen, though more feebly than on the day before. But at noon, when Caesar had sent three legions and all the cavalry with Gaius Trebonius, the lieutenant-general, to get forage, the enemy swooped suddenly from all directions upon the foraging parties, with such vigour that they did not stop short of the legions drawn up for battle. Our troops charged them fiercely and drove them back, and did not bring the pursuit to an end until the cavalry, relying on the support of the legions they saw behind them, drove the enemy headlong and slew a great number of them, giving them no chance to rally or stand fast, nor to leap down from their chariots. After this rout the succours which had assembled from all quarters took their departure; and never afterwards did the enemy engage us at their full strength.

18 Having obtained knowledge of their plans, Caesar led his army into the borders of Cassivellaunus as far as the river Thames, which can be crossed at one place only on foot, and that with difficulty. When he was come thither he remarked that on the other bank of the river a great force of the enemy was drawn up. The bank was fortified with a fringe of sharp projecting stakes, and stakes of the same kind fixed under water were concealed by the stream. When he had learnt these details from prisoners and deserters, Caesar sent the cavalry in advance and ordered the legions to follow up instantly. But the troops moved with such speed and such spirit, although they had only their heads above water, that the enemy could not withstand the assault of legions and cavalry, but abandoned the banks and betook themselves to flight.

19 When Cassivellaunus, as above set forth, had relinquished all hope of a struggle, and disbanded the greater part of his force, with the remainder — about four thousand charioteers — he kept our marches under observation, and, withdrawing a little from the route, concealed himself in entangled positions among the woods. In whatever districts he had learnt that we intended to march he drove all cattle and human beings from the fields into the woods; then, whenever our cavalry dashed out over the fields to plunder and devastate more freely, he sent out charioteers from the woods by every road and path, engaging our cavalry to their great danger,

and preventing them by the fear thus caused from ranging farther afield. The only course left to Caesar was to allow no party to remove very far from the main column of the legions, and to do as much harm to the enemy in laying waste the fields and in conflagrations as the marching powers of the legionaries could accomplish.

20 In the meantime the Trinobantes, the strongest state, perhaps, in those parts — the state from which young Mandubracius, in quest of the protection of Caesar, had come to him on the mainland of Gaul: his own father had held the kingship in the state, but had been slain by Cassivellaunus, when he himself had escaped death by flight — sent deputies to Caesar, promising to surrender to him and to do his commands, and beseeching him to protect Mandubracius from outrage at the hands of Cassivellaunus, and to send him to their state as ruler and sovereign lord. Caesar required of them forty hostages, and corn for the army, and sent Mandubracius to them. They speedily did his commands, and sent hostages to the number required, and corn.

21 When the Trinobantes had been placed under protection and secured from all outrage at the hands of the troops, the Cenimagni, the Segontiaci, the Ancalites, the Bibroci, and the Cassi sent deputations and surrendered to Caesar. From them he learnt that the stronghold of Cassivellaunus was not far from thence, fenced by woods and marshes; and that he had assembled there a considerable quantity of men and cattle. Now the Britons call it a stronghold when they have fortified a thick-set woodland with rampart and trench, and thither it is their custom to collect, to avoid a hostile inroad. For this spot Caesar now started with the legions: he found it thoroughly fortified by nature and by handiwork, but none the less he made a vigorous assault from two sides. The enemy tarried for a space, but did not stand the assault of our troops, and broke away from another side of the stronghold. A great quantity of cattle was found there; and many of the enemy were caught in the act of fleeing and put to death.

22 While these events were proceeding thereabout, Cassivellaunus sent messages to Kent, a country by the sea, as above set forth, over whose four districts Cingetorix, Carvilius, Taximagulus, and Segovax ruled as kings, and commanded them to collect all their forces for a sudden attempt and assault upon the naval camp. But when they were come to the camp the Romans made a sortie and slew many of them, capturing also Lugotorix, a commander of noble station; and then withdrew the detachment without loss. Upon report of this engagement Cassivellaunus was constrained, by the numerous defeats he had suffered, by the devastation of his borders, and chiefly by his alarm at the revolt of the states, to send deputies to Caesar and treat for peace, by the help of Commius the Atrebatian. Caesar had determined to winter on the Continent, in view of sudden commotions in Gaul; and as he had little of the summer left, and was aware that it might easily be spun out to no purpose, he made requisition of hostages, and determined what tribute Britain should pay yearly to Rome. He straitly charged Cassivellaunus to do no hurt to Mandubracius or the Trinobantes.

23 As soon as the hostages were received he led the army back to the sea, and found the ships repaired. When they had been launched he decided, as he had a great number of prisoners, and some ships had perished in the storm, to convey the army back by two journeys. And eventually, of all that number of ships and in all those voyages, not a single ship carrying troops in this or the previous year was missing. But of the ships sent back empty to him from the Continent —

both those which had disembarked troops on the first journey, and the second fleet which Labienus had caused to be built, to the number of sixty — very few made the rendezvous; almost all the rest were driven back. Caesar waited some time for these in vain; then, fearing he might be precluded from sailing by the season, as the equinox was nigh at hand, he packed the troops of necessity more closely together; a complete calm ensued, and he weighed anchor at the beginning of the second watch, and at dawn touched land and brought all the ships safely to port.

24 The ships were beached, and a council of the Gauls was held at Samarobriva (Amiens). Then, as the corn-crop had been scantier that year in Gaul on account of droughts, Caesar was forced to dispose the army in winter quarters in a different fashion from that of previous years, distributing the legions over a larger number of states. One of the legions he gave to Gaius Fabius, the lieutenant-general, to be led into the country of the Morini, a second to Quintus Cicero for the Nervii, a third to Lucius Roscius for the Esubii; a fourth, with Titus Labienus in command, he ordered to winter among the Remi on the border of the Treveri. There he stationed among the Belgae: in command of them he set Marcus Crassus, the quartermaster-general, and Lucius Munatius Plancus and Gaius Trebonius, lieutenant-generals. One legion, the most recently enrolled north of the Po, with five cohorts, he sent into the country of the Eburones, of which the chief part lies between the Meuse and the Rhine; the tribe was under the rule of Ambiorix and Catuvolcus. He ordered Quintus Titurius Sabinus and Lucius Aurunculeius Cotta, lieutenant-generals, to command those detachments. With the legions distributed after this fashion, he supposed that he could easiest remedy any shortage of corn-supply. And yet the winter quarters of all the legions, save that which he had assigned to Lucius Roscius to be led into the most quiet and peaceful district, were within a range of one hundred miles. He himself meanwhile determined to wait in Gaul until he should have information that the legions were at their stations and the cantonments entrenched.

25 There was among the Carnutes one Tasgetius, a man of the highest lineage, whose ancestors had held the kingship in their state. To him, in consideration for his character and his goodwill towards himself — for in all the campaigns he had profited by his remarkable energy — Caesar had restored the position of his ancestors. He had now reigned for two years and more, when his enemies, with the open approval of many persons in the state, put him to death. The matter was reported to Caesar, who, apprehending — as a considerable number of persons were concerned — that the state might revolt at the prompting of the regicides, ordered Lucius Plancus to move speedily with his legion from Belgium far into the country of the Carnutes and there to winter, and to seize and send to him the person by whose instrumentality he knew that Tasgetius had been put to death. Meanwhile he received information from all the lieutenant-generals and the quartermaster-general, to whom he had assigned the legions, that winter quarters had been reached and each station duly entrenched for the same.