



## [Caesar, The Gallic War VII.77](#)

Critognatus's speech against Rome

**Name of the author:** Caesar

**Date:** 52 BCE

**Language:** Latin

**Category:** Roman

**Literary genre:** History

**Title of work:** The Gallic War

**Reference:** VII.77

**Commentary:**

This text is an excerpt from the book VII of *The Gallic War*, a book which narrates the military events of the year 52 BCE and which ends with the Roman victory at Alesia against Vercingetorix. Concerning the redaction of *The Gallic War* and of the book VII in particular, it remains a debated issue. Some scholars believe that Caesar wrote each book, year by year, during the winter after the campaigns. On the contrary, other scholars believe that it was written all at once, between late 52 and 50 BCE. An intermediary opinion has also been suggested, according to which the work was published in three stages (for the debate, see Riggsby, *Caesar*, p. 9). The text presented here, the longest piece of direct discourse in the whole work, is a speech, invented by Caesar, that he attributes to the Arvernian leader Critognatus. He pronounces it whereas the city of Alesia was besieged by the Roman troops. The Gallic army was waiting inside Alesia for some uncertain military back up, whereas supplies started to lack. During a meeting of the city council, some Gauls debated about what to do. At this moment, Critognatus tries to convince them to wait the siege out.

Critognatus's speech is highly influenced by Roman rhetoric standards (see Riggsby, *Caesar*, p. 113-118) and is carefully structured in three parts (see the division followed in Fabia, *De orationibus*, p. 86-90; Di Lorenzo, "Il discorso," p. 560-562; Riggsby, *Caesar*, p. 110-111). The speech begins with a proem (3-4) in which Critognatus presents the two positions debated in the council of Alesia, namely to yield the city and to turn themselves to the Romans, or to break out of the city to attack the Roman armies. Critognatus immediately rejects the first possibility – that he calls *turpissimam servitutem*, "the most disgraceful slavery" – and recognizes that, even if he disagrees the second it remains an option which has to be debated. The second part of the speech (5-11) is dedicated to the discussion, or more precisely to the rebuttal, of the breaking out option. In the third part of the speech (12-16), Critognatus provides arguments to prove that to hold on the city and to wait for the backup remain the best solution. In this perspective, he quotes the past war against the Cimbri and the Teutones, over a half-century earlier, to show that, at that time, Gauls resisted and preferred cannibalism rather than to surrender to enemy (12-13). Then, Critognatus carries on with his reasoning and starts to develop various anti-Roman motifs to prove that a defeat against the Romans – even at the end of a courageous last stand – would lead Gauls to the worst state of servitude (14-16).

By writing this speech of a Gallic leader, Caesar made a real effort to fit in with the Gallic perspective and context – see for instance the narrative of the consequences of the invasions of the Cimbri and the Teutons on the Gauls –, but also to present Gauls as "stable and civilized," as they are presented as the opposite of the aggressive Germans and as attached to preserve their towns, rights and laws. However, this representation of the civilized Gauls is challenged by the fact that in some passages of this speech, Critognatus is represented as a "sub-barbarian" or as an "out-of-control barbarian" (Riggsby, *Caesar*, p. 116-117). First, we can note the passage (12-13) in which Critognatus praises the courageous nature of the cannibalistic practices of the Gauls during the siege of the Germans, without condemning their cruelty or noticing that he will try to save the inhabitants of Alesia from doing this if they chose to stay in the besieged city (see Riggsby, *Caesar*, p. 115). Second, in the last part of this speech (14-16), Critognatus violently criticizes Rome's imperialism, a criticism which has a consequence: to oppose the Gauls and the Romans, an opposition which may have been skilfully orchestrated by Caesar to better highlight the importance of his victory over them at the end of the book (Di Lorenzo, "Il discorso," p. 554-555). We will focus our commentary on these various anti-Roman arguments.



The main anti-Roman argument used by Caesar's Critognatus to convince the audience to chose his point of view is that a victory of the Romans would led to the loss of liberty and to the imposition of servitude over the Gauls. A lexical analysis shows the importance of this theme as we can count two occurrences of *libertas* (13, 14) and four occurrences of *servitus* (3, 9, 15, 16). This opposition *libertas/servitus* is thus the central issue of Critognatus's speech and it fits in with the global message of the work as, many times, Caesar highlights the fact that Gauls were fighting for their "ancestral freedom against servitude" (see Griffin, "*Iure plectimur*," p. 95). Miriam Griffin has noticed that some passages in which Roman authors described the barbarians as the representatives of true and original virtues, such as *eloquentia*, *virtue* or *libertas*, but also passages in which Roman authors gives voice to barbarians criticizing Rome, could be used by the authors, as Sallust, as a mean to warn the Romans against any degeneration of their *mores* and of their government. Miriam Griffin thus quotes the example of the *Belgae* about whom Caesar says that they are the bravest because they are far from the Roman provinces; a remoteness which enables them to not be softened by the merchants, a situation which clearly echoes the situation of the Romans softened by the wealth of the empire (Caesar, *The Gallic War* I.1; see Griffin, "*Iure plectimur*," p. 107-106). The speech of Caesar's Critognatus does not seem to fit in this category. Actually, even if the Gauls are presented as deeply attached to their freedom and ready to suffer for it, the fact that Critognatus presents cannibalism as the best piece of evidence of this courage is an element which may have been added by Caesar to sharp the opposition between civilised Romans and savage Gauls.

To prove to his audience that a victory of the Romans would led to the loss of liberty and to the imposition of servitude over them, Critognatus uses various rhetorical tools. First, he associates twice in a few lines Roman dominion with "perpetual/everlasting slavery" (*aeterna/perpetua servitus*, 15 and 16). Second, he uses an example from the past, the invasion of the Cimbri and Teutons in Gaul between 109 and 105 BCE, and puts it in comparison with the Roman conquests. Critognatus highlights the contrast between the Cimbri who "departed at length from our borders and sought other countries, leaving us our rights, laws, lands, liberty" (14), and the Romans who made that the "neighbouring part of Gaul", that is the Transalpine Gaul – which became later the Gallia Narbonensis –, "has been reduced to a province with utter change of rights and laws, and which has been subjected to the axes [of the lictors] in everlasting slavery". The fact that Caesar's Critognatus quotes the actual and nearby example of the Transalpine Gaul seems to be a deliberate choice because it may have been a more relevant example for his audience (Riggsby, *Caesar*, p. 111). The contrast is clear between the Germans who imposed just a temporary dominion but, at the end, were respectful of Gauls's liberty and customs and the Roman who imposed an everlasting and total domination. The impression that emerges from this comparison is that the Romans are presented as being harsher than the barbarians. We can notice that such an inversion process clearly echoes an image which appears in a latter work of Juvenal, more precisely in his *Satire VIII*, when the satirist criticizes the Roman governors practicing exactions, governors who are provocatively presented by him as "pirates of the Cilicians" (*piratae Cilicum*). These Roman *nobiles* were thus becoming the savage enemies that Rome had previously fought ([Juvenal, \*Satires VIII.94\*](#)).

By highlighting the fact that Rome imposes an harsh, total and perpetual servitude to the peoples it submitted, Caesar's Critognatus implicitly criticizes a second aspect of Rome's power: the fact that the Romans would have been eager for imposing their dominion everywhere. Such an idea indirectly appears when Caesar's Critognatus tries to convince the audience that the Romans have already imposed their dominion in "far-off nations" (*longinquis nationibus*, 16), but also in closer territory as Gaul Transalpine. With such a statement Caesar's Critognatus implicitly alludes to a very common anti-Roman theme which often appears in the speeches pronounced by enemies of Rome, namely the denunciation of Rome's lust for dominion. Such a theme appears in Sallust's works, for instance when Jugurtha explicitly presents Rome's *lubido imperitandi*, "lust for dominion," as its main motivation for waging wars against so many peoples ([Sallust, \*The War with Jugurtha LXXXI.1\*](#), about the connection between these sources, see Fuchs, *Der geistige*, p. 47); or in Sallust's *Letter of Mithridates*, when the king of Pontus presents the *cupido imperi*, "the desire for dominion," as the main reason for the Romans to wage wars (Sallust, *Histories* IV.60.5; see also the reuse of this anti-Roman theme in Trogus's version, via Justin, of Mithridates's speech against Rome, [Justin, \*Epitome of the Philippic Histories of Pompeius Trogus XXXVIII.3.10-7.10\*](#)). Nevertheless, it is obvious that Caesar's Critognatus stresses less on the issue of Rome's expansionism than it could be the case in these other speeches of enemies of Rome. The main focus of his criticism stays the nature of Rome's dominion which led to a total and perpetual loss of independence for the conquered peoples.

The third anti-Roman motif that Caesar's Critognatus mentions is envy. Actually, envy is presented as the main motivation of Rome's policy of conquest: "But what do the Romans seek or desire, other than, led on by envy (*invidia adducti*), to establish themselves in the lands and in the cities of those whom they know to be noble in reputation and vigorous in war (*quos fama nobiles potentesque bello cognoverunt*), and to bind upon them a perpetual slavery?" (15). The fact that Rome's appetite for conquests led the Romans to attack wealthiest



territories and peoples is a common leitmotiv of most of the speeches of enemies of Rome. It has been used by Sallust, especially in Jugurtha's speech against Rome in which he criticizes the Romans for their *avaritia* and he adds that they will attack every people on earth on the sole criteria that they have great amount of riches ([Sallust, The War with Jugurtha LXXXI.1](#)). It also echoes Sallust's *Letter of Mithridates* where it is written that the Romans would have always had one reason (*causa*) to wage war against all the peoples: their "boundless desire for dominion and riches" (*cupido profunda imperi et divitiarum*, Sallust, *Histories* IV.60.5), and that "The Romans have weapons against all men, the sharpest against those whose defeat yields the greatest spoils (*spolia maxuma*)..." (Sallust, *Histories* IV.60.20). A similar idea appears also in later works as for instance in Tacitus, in his speech of the chief of the Caledonians, Calgacus ([Tacitus, Agricola XXX](#)), or in Trogus/Justin's speech of Mithridates, especially when the author compares the Romans to sanguinary wolves ([Justin, Epitome of the Philippic Histories of Pompeius Trogus XXXVIII.6.8](#)). However, in the attack of Caesar's Critognatus it is not exactly the greed of the Romans and their appetite for riches which is denounced, the Romans are present as eager for attacking other country because of their good reputation (*fama*) and because of their military strength. More than the lust for riches, it is the lust for prestige and for military and political dominion of the Romans which is the main target of Critognatus. As Andrew Riggsby rightly notices, the fact that Critognatus claims that the Romans could envy the Gauls for their "nobility" (*fama nobiles*, 15), may be perceived as a very unusual representation of the Gauls who were more often praised for their strength, their courage or their incorruptibility (Riggsby, *Caesar*, p. 116). This element thus proves how the speech of Caesar's Critognatus is deeply Roman – that could be because of the vocabulary, the rhetorical elements or the examples quoted –, a Roman form which conflicts the anti-Roman content of the speech of the barbarian. Thus, Caesar proposes an anti-Roman speech without presenting its author as the perfect embodiment of an anti-Roman character. The only element whose goal is probably to reassert, in a negative way, the otherness of the Gauls, is the allusion to cannibalism.

As Miriam Griffin writes, this criticism of Rome foreign policy in Caesar's writing does not mean that he would have wanted to "give up the delights of imperialism," as he was himself engaged in the running of the empire (Griffin, "*Iure plectimur*," p. 99). The similarities that we have noticed between the anti-Roman arguments of Critognatus and those exposed in other speeches of enemies of Rome, as for instance in Sallust or, later, in Trogus Pompeius and in Tacitus, show that the anti-Roman themes exposed here were rhetorical commonplaces which corresponded to what was expected from a Latin author when he had to give voice to an enemy of Rome vituperating against Rome's hegemony. An interesting element of this anti-Roman speech invented by Caesar is that Rome's enemy criticizes Rome, but at the same time uses rhetorical tools and a Roman vocabulary to represent his peer. Its other characteristic is that, contrary to many other anti-Roman speeches than we can find in Sallust, Pompeius Trogus or Tacitus, Caesar does not specifically denounce the greed and the lust for riches of the Romans. The target of his criticism is more global as he denounces Rome's dominion as being so oppressive and global that it would led to the submission of every free peoples. Rome's hegemony is thus presented by Critognatus as incompatible with *libertas* which is yet a constituent virtue for the Gauls.

Keywords in the original language:

- [aeternus](#)
- [ager](#)
- [Arverni](#)
- [bellum](#)
- [calamitas](#)
- [Cimbri](#)
- [civitas](#)
- [deditio](#)
- [exemplum](#)
- [fama](#)
- [fides](#)
- [Gallia](#)
- [hostis](#)
- [invidia](#)
- [ius](#)
- [lex](#)
- [libertas](#)



- [maiores](#)
- [mollitia](#)
- [natio](#)
- [nobilis](#)
- [oppidum](#)
- [perpetuus](#)
- [potens](#)
- [provincia](#)
- [Romani](#)
- [securis](#)
- [servitus](#)
- [subiectus](#)
- [terra](#)
- [Teutones](#)
- [turpis](#)
- [virtus](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [cannibalism](#)
- [criticism of Rome](#)
- [cruelty](#)
- [enemy](#)
- [envy](#)
- [freedom](#)
- [Gauls](#)
- [Roman aggressiveness](#)
- [Roman domination](#)
- [submission](#)

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