

Severed Heads, Human Sacrifice, and a Good Gallic Death: Death Diplomacy during Caesar's Campaigns in Gaul

In recent decades, there are growing trends to reconceptualize how Iron Age societies in Europe constructed and understood their world, as well as pressure for more theoretical and comparative approaches, especially in cases where there are minimal to no written records. For example, what is known about the Gauls from a literary perspective is transmitted to us through an entirely Roman lens. Since most of these sources describe centuries of clashes and cross-cultural interactions between the Romans and Gauls, interpretations can be drawn about how both cultures dealt with encounters with one another.

Approaching this from Erik Seeman's notion of "death diplomacy," this paper argues that Julius Caesar (100 – 44 BCE) was curious about and observed Gallic culture, specifically their deathways, to weaponize death and corpses as a means of cross-cultural communication to manipulate and intimidate his Gallic enemies during his campaigns in Gaul (58 -51 BCE). This paper will also show, however, that there were moments in Caesar's commentaries in which he was struck with awe by his enemies' bravery in the face of death. Alternatively, I also argue that such death diplomacy was not one-sided but implemented by the Gauls in their numerous attempts of resistance as practical and symbolic ways to send a threatening message to the Romans. Caesar's narrative of his campaigns in Gaul illustrates how culture, and particularly attitudes toward death, influenced diplomatic and cross-cultural interactions among the different participants in the Roman-Gallic conflict during the Late Republic.