

Romanization of Gaul

The Development of Gallo-Roman Identity

(Source: Peter Casey, Term Paper for HIST 711 Urbanism in Antiquity with Professor Joel Allen at CUNY Queens College)

In 52 BCE, Julius Caesar successfully completed the conquest of all of Gaul, an area roughly equivalent to modern France and Belgium, incorporating it into the territory of Rome. The Gallic population was culturally different from the Romans, and had long fought against them in wars to defend their homeland, but over time, the Gauls came to embrace Roman culture and even Roman identity. In other words, they came to see themselves as Roman, although they still retained much of their Gallic identity. This process of Romanization, and the forces behind it, are described in the text below.



"Vercingetorix Throws Down His Arms at the Feet of Julius Caesar", 1899, by Lionel Noel Royer

The Romans were certainly involved in the process of Romanization. Their intentions behind Romanizing efforts were to keep Gaul, and conquered territories generally, subdued, complacent, and free of trouble that could otherwise disrupt the stability of the empire, politically, militarily, or economically. Yet their involvement in the process of cultural change was subtler than might be assumed. The Roman Tacitus describes how and why his father-in-law, the Gallo-Roman general Agricola, sought to Romanize and urbanize populations in northwestern Europe:

"[I]n order that men who were... uncivilized and... easily moved (motivated) to wars might become accustomed to peace and quiet through pleasures, he encouraged individuals and assisted communities to build temples, *fora*, and homes by praising those who were forward and rebuking those who were

inactive. Thus competition for honor took the place of compulsion... And this was called civilization among those who did not know better, although it was a part of slavery."

The Romans certainly wanted Romanization and encouraged it, and in fact needed it in order to cultivate a "unified ruling class" to control their conquered lands. Yet Romanization was not typically achieved through direct aggressive action. Instead, they left it to people themselves to embrace it. The Gauls who first adopted Roman ways did so not from a desire to be Roman, but mainly to fulfill the needs of their communities. For instance, Gallic society was heavily focused on warfare. In his book, *Romanization in the Time of Augustus*, Ramsay MacMullen described Gallic feasts at which "...ranking by superiority in arms was asserted in occasional duels and challenges and deaths in the presence of other guests." Violence and warfare served practical purposes among the Gauls: it gave them an opportunity to attain status and prestige within their society and among their neighbors.

But violence between Gallic communities was undesirable to the Romans, who considered peace and stability their goals in the provinces. Yet this created a conflict for Gallic communities because "[I]f and its values as they had lived it made no sense in the *Pax Romana*." As Greg Woolf explains in his book *The Origins of Provincial Civilization in Gaul*, "The new elites were in need of some such legitimacy devices since Roman rule had ended some pre-conquest practices, such as intertribal warfare, through which Iron Age chiefs had won prestige and power..." The Romans then took the opportunity to provide the local elites with "paths to ambition through the Roman way..." Gallo-Roman



elites took it upon themselves, with their own wealth, to build Gallo-Roman cities, commissioning the construction of temples, *fora*, and other forms of monumental architecture, which served to increase their prestige among their own people. Additionally, these building projects could have served to impress Roman governors in order to gain their support, and as with public works generally, they would have provided jobs for the underclass, winning the favor of the people and further strengthening their positions.

However, while attempts to gain social status may have started Romanization among the local communities, motivations soon shifted. In the article “A False Start? The Roman Urbanization of Western Europe”, RFJ Jones points out that “[t]he passage of time had its effect on the tribal aristocracies. The tribal leaders who took the decisions to build towns in the Roman style were not the same people who had faced the Roman army when it had first incorporated them into the Empire.” By the time two or three generations had passed, there was a clear shift from a natural process of exchange and acculturation to a conscious effort on the part of Gallic populations to become increasingly Romanized. The adoption of certain aspects of Roman culture had led Gauls to identify, at least in part, as Romans, and to seek to further validate that aspect of their identity by embracing more Roman ways and material culture. Woolf discusses the shift in thinking between the generations, saying that “...it may also be that the first generation of truly Gallo-Roman aristocrats embraced the urbanizing project for reasons that were not wholly pragmatic or strategic, but rather because the city was so central to the vision of civilization they had embraced.”



Questions

1. How did the Gauls come under Roman rule?
2. Why did the Romans want to “Romanize” Gaul?
3. What role did violence play in Galic culture and society?
4. What motivated the early Gallo-Romans to Romanize?
5. How did the motivations for Romanization among the Gauls change over time?
6. Do you think conquest by Rome was a positive or negative change for the Gauls? Explain.