

Caesar's description of the Germans' social organization and mores in book VI of his *Bellum Gallicum* has long been the subject of multiple scholarly controversies. Its focus on various seemingly random ethnographic details, and above all the description of the Hercynian forest and its fantastic beasts, have so surprised readers that the authenticity of the passage itself has been questioned (Meusel, Berlin 1910, 20-75, and Klotz, Leipzig 1910; in favor of rehabilitation, see Beckmann Dortmund 1930). As a partial justification of its presence, a number of scholars have shown the artificiality of one of the passage's key traits: Caesar's dissociation of the Gauls from the Germans. In their eyes, it serves a specific political goal, namely to justify his decision not to invade Germany and to retreat from the Suebi's land back to the other side of the Rhine, into Gaul (Rimbaud 1953). A closer examination of the passage's language, vocabulary and literary *topoi* further illustrates its relevance.

In keeping with Caesar's political agenda, the description of the Germans and of the Hercynian forest and its wild creatures is not a gratuitous ethnographic excursus followed by a brutal return to military matters in VI, 29. Through a cunning use of literary ethnographic traditions, Caesar elaborates a highly different concept of the German barbarian from that found previously in the *BG*, for instance in the portrait of Ariovistus (*BG* I,44). In resorting to the ethnographic *topos* of the noble savage, he craftily implies a lack of tameness of the Germans by creating an image of great primitiveness, made all the more blatant by a comparison with the Gauls. The carefully chosen literary *topoi* give the impression of a semi-fantastic, removed race on whom the Romans thus have no possible grasp – a far cry from the German barbaric threat depicted in books I and IV. War against such a people is made to seem both unnecessary and daunting. The apparent digression thus ties directly into Caesar's political and military motives.

In this sense, the elimination of the term *barbarus* from our passage is far from innocent. By such a striking omission, Caesar avoids the dynamic polarization usually created in his work by the use of such a term: one that implies necessary intervention, conquest and assimilation. He thus excludes the Germans from the portion of the world seen by the Romans as one to be conquered and civilized, and establishes them within a fantasy world where habitual Roman imperialism no longer applies. Moreover, the frequent positive use of the term *adsuefactus* in passages referring to the Gauls and their "civilization" by the Romans (*BG* IV, 3) stands in stark contrast to the negated use of the same adjective in our passage to underscore the Germans' impossible domestication. The same use of the negated adjective *adsuefactus* in the description of the fauna of the Hercynian forest can hardly be coincidental (*BG* VI, 28). It is clear that these beasts (the unicorn, the elk and the ure-oxen) are deliberately portrayed with similar wording and a parallel insistence on impossible domestication, allied with the attribution of numerous fantastic traits, as a complement to and reflection of Caesar's depiction of the Germans. The Hercynian forest, far from being an incongruous digression, is an additional tool used by Caesar to justify his retreat from Germany.

