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A Fixed *Astérix*: A Comic Reading of Romanization in Gaul

Abstract

René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo's Astérix has become one of the most popular comics around the world; it has sold over 380 million copies and has been translated into over 100 languages. Astérix follows the adventures of Asterix, his best friend Obelix, and other Gauls who live in the only village that has not surrendered to the Romans after Julius Caesar's defeat of Vercingetorix at the Battle of Alesia in 52 BCE. The comic imagines a place where the Gauls successfully resist Roman domination and thus speaks to issues of colonization and conquest. At the same time, Astérix uses several comic strategies to highlight the processes of acculturation and adaptation that have long been at work among modern European national cultures. Through its counterfactual comic rewriting of the aftermath of the Gallic Wars, Astérix presents a cosmopolitan Gallo-Roman world populated by different historical cultures. Through Astérix, Goscinny and Uderzo present and promote a vision of the French past to be celebrated in defiance of the Romans today, those who would modernize France at the expense of her rich cultural heritage.

1. Astérix and Romanization

René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo published the first *Astérix* comic in the October 1959 edition of the French comic magazine *Pilote*. This *bande dessinée* (Franco-Belgian comic) has enjoyed sustained popularity around the world. It has sold over 380 million copies and has been translated into over 100 languages (McElduff 2016; Gustines 2019). *Astérix* became a national hit almost overnight; in 1965, just six years after the publication of *Astérix le Gaulois*, the French launched their first satellite into space bearing the name *Astérix*, aka A-1 (Nye, 1980). Despite the deaths of Goscinny in 1977 and Uderzo in 2020, many others have kept *Astérix* alive in comic form as well as film, with several

animated or live action movies based on the comic.[1] The French theme park, Parc Astérix, demonstrates the enduring popularity of *Astérix*. Also known as the "L'irréductible Parc" (after "les irréductibles Gaulois"), it opened in Plailly in 1989 and is the second largest theme park in France. There are also numerous websites devoted to the comic. The official website has five language options to keep fans informed of all things *Astérix*.[2]

Astérix follows the adventures of the "little star" of the series (*astérisque*), Asterix, his best friend Obelix, and the other Gauls who live in the only village that has not surrendered to the Romans after Julius Caesar's defeat of Vercingetorix at the Battle of Alesia in 52 BCE. The comic is set in 50 BCE, and the villagers keep the Romans at bay through a potion brewed by the village druid Panoramix that temporarily grants great strength to those who drink it. Moving from panel to panel with illustrations to match, the first issue, *Astérix le Gaulois*, begins as follows:

> En 50 avant J.-C., Nos ancêtres les Gaulois avaient été vaincus par les Romains, après une longue lutte…
> Des chefs telles que Vercingétorix doivent déposer leurs armes aux pieds de César…
> La paix s'est installée, troublée par quelques attaques de Germains, vite repoussées…
> Toute la Gaule est occupée… […]
> Toute ?… Non ! Car une région résiste victorieusement à L'envahisseur. Une petite région entourée de camps retrenchés Romains…
> Tous les efforts pour vaincre ces fiers Gaulois ont été inutiles et César s'interroge…
> "Quid ?"
> C'est ici que nous faisons connaissance avec notre héros, le guerrier Astérix, qui va s'adonner à son sport favori : la chasse. (Goscinny and Uderzo 1961, 5)

Uderzo draws Caesar with a dark, angry look on his face, perplexed by his legions' inability to conquer this one last village. He does not know (yet) that Asterix relies on the potion from the druid Panoramix to fuel his physical prowess, and all he can ask is "Quid?" Notably, in the panel devoted to Vercingetorix laying his arms at Caesar's feet, the proud Arvernian warlord drops them on

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1 In 2012 Albert Uderzo selected author Jean-Yves Ferri and illustrator Didier Conrad to take over the *Astérix* series. Both *Astérix & Obélix contre César* (1995) and *Astérix et Obélix: Mission Cléopâtre* (2002) are among the highest grossing films in French history. To date, there have been ten animated *Astérix* films since and five live action movies since 1967.

2 The official website is: https://www.asterix.com.

Caesar's feet, with the great general yelling "Ouap!" The comic resistance to the Romans begins here, with a proud Vercingetorix depicted standing before a seated Caesar in pain.

Even before the Gallic War, Roman advances into Gaul could be painful. Strategies of adaptation as well as both open defiance and quiet resistance have long characterized the colonialization and conquest of one culture by the other. Although the creeping Roman conquest of Gaul had begun even earlier, it accelerated in 125 BCE when the Romans agreed to protect a trading partner, the Greek colony of Massilia (Marseilles), from the raids of a Gallic tribe (Sulluvii) and their allies. The Romans soon established their first province north of the Alps in 121 BCE (Gallia Transalpina; later renamed Gallia Narbonensis; aka Provincia Nostra). They began building the roads that would eventually assist Julius Caesar and later Romans maintain the supply lines critical to feeding the Roman legions.

Historians have long studied the increasing political, cultural, economic, and linguistic influence of the Roman Republic and Empire on the Gauls and other tribal peoples of Europe through this process of trade, conquest, and colonization. The German historian Theodore Mommsen used the term "Romanisation" in 1885 to describe this process in the fifth volume of *Römische Geschichte*, and he regarded Roman culture as superior to the "barbarian" culture of the native peoples (Mommsen 1976, 1996; cf. Haverfield 1912 and Julian 1908-1926). Contemporary archaeologists and historians have articulated more scholarly palatable views of this Romanization process, and some even dispute the term as a descriptor of these cultural exchanges (Woolf 1998). Many have focused on native efforts to emulate and adapt to Roman cultural norms, and today Gallo-Roman culture represents one of the earliest and best understood examples of Romanization (Cf. Cunliffe 1999, Millet 1990).

A number of ancient sources provide evidence for Romanization, including Posidonius of Rhodes, Diodoris Siculus, the geographer Strabo, Appian, Cassius Dio, Tacitus, and Pliny the Elder. The Romans themselves had different names for the Gallic tribal regions based on their cultural proximity to Rome. For example, "Hairy Gaul" (Gallia Comata, for the long-haired Gauls), was farther north and therefore farthest from Roman influence, while "Toga-wearing Gaul" (Gallia Togata), otherwise known as Cisalpine Gaul, included the Gallic tribes in northern Italy most influenced by Roman cultural values

(Hammond 1996, xxvii). Asterix's village lies on the northwest coast of France in the region of Armorica (Britanny) and is a part of "Hairy Gaul." For the Romans, more physical distance from Rome equated to more barbarism among the natives because their standard was Rome, the Eternal City (*Urbs Aeterna*). In their first volume, *Astérix le Gaulois*, Goscinny and Uderzo have fun with this history. When the Roman centurion Caius Bonus captures the druid Panoramix and forces him to make the magic potion in their camp at Compendium, Panoramix instead makes a potion that causes the Romans' hair to grow to comic proportions. By the end of the story, the Roman legionaries look very much like hairy Gauls (1961, 44-48; cf. Almagor 2016, 124-125).

Astérix's historical reconstruction of this fixed moment in time merits analysis because the comic speaks to issues of colonization and conquest. Goscinny and Uderzo have created a comic universe where a minority native culture maintains its way of life by denying victory to a majority, militant, technologically advanced culture. Asterix, Obelix, and their allies invariably find themselves outside their village walls and in a world where the Romans have brought their own culture to bear. In book after book, Asterix and Obelix continue to prove their quality as Gallic heroes. They free slaves and assist gladiators, they resist Roman subterfuge, disrupt construction projects, win bets against Roman prefects, help fellow tribal peoples, and foil other threats to their simple way of life. Through it all, they transform the Roman stereotype of the barbaric, impetuous Gaul into the heroic, victorious one. Conversely, the Romans are not the historical Late Republican picture of ruthless efficiency and organization after the Marian reforms in 107 BCE. Instead, the legions are often the hapless, and generally helpless, recipients of comic pratfall violence from Asterix and Obelix, much to the chagrin of Julius Caesar.

At the same time, however, *Astérix* imbeds relevant historical, cultural, and linguistic details within the comic itself that highlight the processes of acculturation and adaptation that have long been at work among modern European national cultures. Through its counterfactual comic rewriting of the aftermath of the Gallic Wars, *Astérix* presents a cosmopolitan Gallo-Roman world populated by different historical cultures. *Astérix* routinely parodies people, events, and cultural movements in the modern world after World War II, but it does so within a comic universe peopled by Gauls, Romans, and many other world historical cultures. Goscinny and Uderzo want to make people laugh through this interplay of peoples and cultures. As Peter Kessler

notes, "the authors did not intend to cause offence with these national and international jokes. They do not after all make fun of a nation, but of the way that nation is seen by others" (1995, 87).

To this end, Goscinny and Uderzo deploy endless national stereotypes, puns, parodies, caricatures, symbolic references, double entendres, mythological references ("Par Toutatis!"), and historical allusions ("Alea iacta est!") to both induce laughter and edify their readers through comedic satire.[3] Most of the odd-numbered volumes focus on the Gauls and the Romans around their village in the region of Armorica. Cultural distinctions between Gaul (France) and Rome (Italy) are a constant reminder of the comic cultural battle. Food is a major theme, and Roman food is denigrated in favor of French cuisine. The different regions of France also receive comic treatment; Parisians stereotype the French in the provinces and vice versa. In *Le serpe d'or*, the pollution and traffic in the Gallic cities pokes fun at the perceived failures of modern urban engineering (Goscinny and Uderzo 1962, 11). *Astérix* presents a vision of the French past to be celebrated in defiance of today's Romans, those who would modernize France at the expense of her rich cultural heritage.

Moreover, historical appearance and costumes in *Astérix* signify nationality and general cultural values. The Gauls have mustaches and the Romans do not; the Romans of the late Republic believed mustaches were signs of barbarism, as do the Romans in *Astérix* (Allen 1875, 196-8; Almagor 2016, 119). The comic makes puns out of names: "Panoramix" is the wise village druid, "Abraracourcix" is the chief of Asterix's village, and "Assurancetourix" is the village bard who sings terribly and is just as bad on the lyre. Their English equivalents provide similar laughs: Panoramix becomes "Getafix," as he is the one who provides the magic potion; Abraracourcix becomes "Vitalstatistix"; and Assurancetourix becomes the aptly named "Cacofonix." These naming strategies follow traditional national and linguistic identities for the various cultural groups. The names of Gallic men end in "-ix" in homage to Vercingetorix, while Roman male names end in "-us" according to Latin noun

3 Anthea Bell and Derek Hockridge translated most of the *Astérix* stories into English, beginning in 1969. Adrianna Hunter has served as the English translator since 2017 in *Asterix and the Chariot Race* (*Astérix et la Transitalique*, 2017). Because puns are so language specific, the translators often privilege the comic thrust of their work over literal translations. Cf. Kessler 1995 and Armistead 2013.

conventions. These funny Roman and Gallic names usually relate to the plot of the comic. For example, in *Le Domaine des Dieux*, the Roman architect is "Anglaigus," while the Gallic traitor in the English translation of *Le Tour de Gaule d'Astérix* is "Unpatriotix." Of course, this villain reforms himself in the spirit of Gallic unity after an encounter with Asterix and Obelix.

Goscinny and Uderzo mine these cultural stereotypes for laughs when Asterix and Obelix leave Gaul for adventures in the wider world, usually in the even-numbered volumes. Over-the-top costumes are deployed to identify national character, and all historical periods are fair game. For example, the stereotypically warlike Germanic Gothic tribesmen are portrayed with the nineteenth-century Prussian spiked helmet known as the Pickelhaube. When the Goths speak, their speech bubbles are always in a fraktur (Gothic) font. The Egyptians, of course, speak and write in hieroglyphics. A fan favorite, Cleopatra, makes her *Astérix* debut in *Astérix et Cléopâtre* and resembles Elizabeth Taylor's Cleopatra from the 1963 film. The comics make her nose rather long, as Goscinny and Uderzo play on Blaise Pascal's comment in the *Pensées* that the length of her nose changed history (Goscinny and Uderzo 1965). The Helvetians (the Swiss) have red hair and beards and wear lederhosen, the Normans are stereotypical Vikings, and the tough Belgians live on beer and meat and compete with the Gauls for who are the bravest of Rome's enemies.[4]

No area of European life is exempt from the fun. The Helvetians (the Swiss) make great cheese, accurate timepieces, are excellent bankers, and prefer neutrality in times of war. Both the Britons and the Iberians, like the Gauls, have their own pockets of resistance under their respective chiefs, Zebigbos and Soupalognon y Crouton (the English translation uses the name Huevos y Bacon for the Iberian chief). Within the *Astérix* universe, Britain fell to Rome because the Britons always stopped fighting at 5:00 PM for hot water and milk on weekdays (a precursor to tea, which Asterix introduces to them) and never fought on the weekends (Goscinny and Uderzo 1966, 10, 45, 48). Of course, Caesar promptly chooses those times to fight them and therefore conquers them rather easily (Ibid. 6). While in Spain, Asterix and Obelix run into Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, and they also introduce bullfighting to the Iberians (Goscinny and Uderzo 1969, 32; 45-46). As Christopher Pinet points out, Goscinny and Uderzo rely

4 *Astérix* is a rich resource for scholars interested in teaching cultural humor. For a deep analysis of Belgian culture in *Astérix chez les Belges*, cf. Vines 2008.

heavily on stereotypes drawn from national cultures: "Surely it is no accident that nearly one third of the books treat different national groupings. The titles are as follows: *Astérix et les Goths*, *Astérix en Hispanie*, *Astérix chez les Helvetes*, *La Grande Traversee* (American Indians), *Astérix en Corse*. In addition, Asterix meets many foreigners in *Astérix aux Jeux Olympiques* and *Astérix Legionnaire*" (1977, 157). The travels of Asterix and Obelix have continued to this day. The duo travel to Scotland in *Astérix chez les Pictes*, the first volume of *Astérix* written by Jean-Yves Ferri and illustrated by Didier Conrad.

Finally, there are other characters in *Astérix* that Goscinny and Uderzo do not depict primarily through their national identities vis-à-vis the Romans, but instead play to other mid-twentieth century stereotypes. Barbe Rouge and the pirates, for example, appear throughout the series. They fly the Jolly Roger, and with a few wardrobe changes and some pistols, they could quite possibly sail on Blackbeard's Queen Anne's Revenge. A running gag is that Asterix and Obelix routinely beat them up and sink their ship, so much so that the pirates have taken to sinking their own ship just to avoid the conflict. Perhaps their most famous moment is in *Astérix Légionnaire* when Uderzo draws the wreckage of their ship in a parody of Théodore Géricault's *Le Radeau de la Méduse* (1818-1819). Sitting with his battered pirates on the floating wreckage, Barbe Rouge mournfully laments, "Je suis médusé!" (Goscinny and Uderzo 1967, 35). English translators Anthea Bell and Derek Hockridge give Barbe Rouge the line, "We've been framed, by Jericho!" and thus preserve the comedy by punning on the painter's name (2011, Omnibus 4, 43).

Some of these characters, including gladiators and slaves, represent conquered and oppressed peoples within Roman culture.[5] Asterix and the other Gauls nearly always support these characters against the Romans. For example, in *Astérix Gladiateur*, Asterix and Obelix manage to free the gladiators from their "cruel métier" after several misadventures, including teaching the gladiators a child's

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5 There are well-documented problems with Uderzo's visual depictions of the African (in *Astérix*, Numidian) slaves. Criticisms of Uderzo's art (black skin, exaggerated red lips, exotic clothing) generally fall somewhere between two positions. Some argue that Uderzo's artistic depiction of the Numidians, while distasteful and insensitive to readers today, is a symptom of Uderzo's historical context, while others argue that his drawings are clearly racist and white supremacist. Uderzo's art has generated press in the United States over the edited versions that children's graphic novel publisher Papercutz began publishing in the summer of 2020. Cf. Alverson and Reid 2019, and Livingstone 2020.

guessing game that infuriates Julius Caesar from his perch in the arena (Goscinny and Uderzo, 1964, 46). On the other hand, these characters often have their own interests and do not necessarily support the Gauls against the Romans. For example, in *Le Domaine des Dieux*, slaves from a number of national backgrounds (Belgian, Gothic, Iberian, Lusitanian, and Numidian) are clearing the forest for the Romans so that Caesar can build luxury apartments all around the village of the Gauls. To help free the slaves, Asterix offers Panoramix's magic potion to Duplicatha, their Numidian leader. The slaves, however, have another idea in mind. They drink the potion, but instead beating up the Romans and leaving, they beat up the Romans to leverage better working conditions, including better pay than the legionaries. Duplicatha brings their demands to the Roman architect Anglaigus:

> Nous désirons quelques petits changements dans nos conditions de travail : nous voulons être payés et affranchis dès que le premier immeuble sera bâti…
> Bien entendu, nous voulons aussi des congés payés, des heures supplémentaires, la suppression progressive des coups de fouet, l'interdiction de la chaîne, et la construction de logements décents. (Goscinny and Uderzo 1971, 22)

Anglaigus agrees to free the slaves after they have finished clearing the forest. However, the druid Panoramix has given Asterix and Obelix acorns dipped in a magic potion that cause them to grow instantly into trees. Previously, the two Gauls had been planting these acorns to disrupt the Romans, but now the newly grown trees are preventing the slaves from receiving their freedom.

Apparently at an impasse with the Gauls, Duplicatha goes to Asterix's village looking for a way to finish clearing the forest, and Panoramix finds a way to solve both of their problems: "ne vous inquiétez pas; nous allons nous amuser un peu avec les Romains. Nous leur donnerons une nouvelle leçon, tout en aidant ces pauvres esclaves" (25). His clever plan involves allowing the Romans to finish their building program, and soon enough, the slaves receive their freedom. Many of them decide to take their earnings and become pirates; Barbe Rouge is seen leading a group of former slaves to the coast while tossing a bag of money into the air (31).

2. Virtuous Gauls and Decadent Romans

Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* connects Rome's decline to the twin evils of barbarism and religion and the concomitant loss

of traditional Roman civic virtues (Gibbon, 1776-1789). In *Astérix*, however, the Eternal City eternally rots from within, with corrupt Roman governors and greedy prefects lording power over bumpkin legionaries or local despots. Although Julius Caesar retains his *dignitas* throughout the series by always honoring Asterix's requests, he constantly falls victim to his Romans' ineptitude.[6]

On the other hand, it is barbarism as Goscinny and Uderzo define it that marks the path to virtue. Their distinction between two kinds of Gauls in *Le Combat des Chefs* illustrates the comic tension between those who live in the civilized, cosmopolitan, and decadent world of the Romans, and those who live in that one last village that will not submit to their rule. Drawing from the history of Romanization, Goscinny writes:

> Au temps de l'occupation Romaine, il y avait en Gaule deux sortes de Gaulois…
> Tout d'abord, ceux qui acceptaient la Paix Romaine et qui essayaient de s'adapter à la puissante civilisation des envahisseurs…
> Et puis, il y avait les autres Gaulois, irréductibles, courageux, teigneux, têtus, ripailleurs, bagarreurs et rigolards, dont les plus beaux spécimens se trouvaient dans une petite peuplade que nous connaissons bien… (Goscinny and Uderzo 1966, 5)

This introduction sets up "le combat des chefs" between Abraracourcix and Aplusbégalix, the chief of Sérum, a town friendly to the Romans. The scheming Romans are behind this tribal feud, having manipulated Aplusbégalix into challenging Abraracourcix for rule of his village. While Asterix and his fellow villagers have mustaches, dress like Gauls, usually drink beer, and live humbly in Gallic houses, Aplusbégalix is clean shaven, wears a toga, drinks wine, and lives in a shoddy Gallic attempt at a Roman villa.[7]

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6 Goscinny and Uderzo are excellent students of Roman history. Their positive treatment of Caesar may have to do with his well-known reputation for *clementia* (mercy) toward his enemies. Both Caesar's contemporaries (e.g., Cicero) and later historians have argued about the sincerity of that clemency. Cf. Konstan 2005. For more on Julius Caesar in *Astérix*, cf. Barnett 2016 (138-9).

7 Goscinny and the myriad translators of *Astérix* commonly draw inspiration from the world of pop culture and politics for the names of *Astérix* characters in their own languages. For example, here "Aplusbégalix" becomes "Cassius Ceramix" in the Bell and Hockridge translation of *Le Combat des Chefs* (*Asterix and the Big Fight*; trans. 1971). This is a play on the name Cassius Clay, who changed his name to Muhammad Ali in 1964. As one might expect, Aplusbégalix/Cassius Ceramix trains for the big fight in a boxing ring.

After many misadventures, Abraracourcix and the Gauls triumph over both Aplusbégalix and the Romans. In a show of Gallic unity, Abraracourcix deals mercifully with his fellow Gaul: "Je te laisse partir libre avec ton people! Je te demande simplement de ne pas oublier que tu es Gaulois et de ne plus server la cause des Romains. Va!" (Ibid. 47). The book then ends with a reimagined, romantic account of the Gallo-Romans:

> La vie a changé dans le village Gallo-Romain de Sérum. Ses habitants ont retrouvé la civilization traditionnelle ; ils sont devenus rigolards, ripailleurs, braillards…
> Et ils ne dédaignent pas, à l'occasion, de faire un bout de conduit aux patrouilles Romaines… Quant à Aplusbégalix, il est devenu le chef plus poli de toute la Gaulle. Il est sans doute à l'origine de la reputation d'amabilité qui a été la nôtre dans le monde…. il fut un temps. (Ibid. 47)

Here, Abraracourcix *qua* Vercingetorix speaks for Goscinny and Uderzo, who want a unified Gaul/France to resist the Romans and their civilizing process.

As an ahistorical resistance imbedded within a specific historical moment, *Astérix* induces its readers to identify with the weak (the Gauls) who resist the hegemony of the strong (the Romans). The simple plot device of a few Gallic warriors versus Roman legions tracks very much like similar hero journeys, and consumers of the comic may be drawn to *Astérix* as a classic underdog story. Stuart Barnett posits that the popularity of the comic may have to do with the fact that this is a mythical native population that maintains its culture in the face of "overwhelming might" (Barnett 2016, 132). He argues as follows:

> One of the key reasons for the great appeal of *Astérix* is the notion of a small group being able to resist domination by an extremely powerful foreign people. As such, *Astérix* engages with what I call the origin of the pure native. By this I mean a point in the past when a people was characterized by a purity uncontaminated by influence from any other group of people––in other words, the point of origin of an autochthonous people. (Ibid.)

Stuart recognizes, of course, that "as it is so difficult to deny the hybrid nature of any people in a contemporary context, the notion of the pure native usually is pushed into the distant past" (Ibid.) *Astérix* provides this reimagined Celtic past for the French by identifying them with the Gauls. In the pages of Asterix, it is eternally the year 50 BCE and the French resist the historical process of Romanization.

This autochthonous, underdog storyline certainly supports a large and loyal fanbase, particularly in France. For example, when Albert Uderzo sold his share of *Astérix* to the publishing company Hachette in 2008, his own daughter Sylvie criticized him in *Le Monde* by claiming that her father had betrayed the comic to the Romans, i.e., the rich technocrats of the modern world. In stark disagreement with her aging father and the people she believed were taking advantage of him, she noted that "Son entourage, recruté sûrement par César du côté de chez Dark Vador, répète en boucle: 'Il a quand même le droit de faire ce qu'il veut, c'est son œuvre !'" (Uderzo 2009). As for Goscinny, Christopher Pinet remarks on his position: "Goscinny also sees technocracy as a threat, and he adopts the posture of the underdog or so-called 'average man' who feels incompetent and impotent before the faceless bureaucracy of the institutions that dominate his life and responds by resigning himself to the situation with a shrug of the shoulders and the comment 'Faut pas chercher à comprendre'" (1977, 153).

These sentiments are certainly in line with the political commentary that Goscinny and Uderzo imbed within the comic. *Astérix* does not shy from lampooning current events and political figures. For example, in *Le Domaine des Dieux*, published in the aftermath of the riots of May 1968, *Astérix* criticizes modern industrialization, exemplified by Caesar's effort to destroy the forest next to the Gauls in order to build a patrician colony. In *Le serpe d'or*, while on his way to Lutetia (Paris) with Obelix, Asterix looks at an aqueduct being built and says, "avec leurs constructions modernes, les Romaines gâchent le paysage" (Goscinny and Uderzo 1962, 10). When the Romans decide to defeat the Gauls by introducing capitalism into their village in *Obélix et Compagnie*, the plan of the Roman economist Caius Saugrenus ultimately fails, ending in ruin for the Roman economy and a return to the simple life for the Gauls. Saugrenus is a parody of the French politician Jacques Chirac, the Prime Minister of France at the time who would later become President of France from 1995 to 2007.[8]

Here, *Le Domaine des Dieux*, *Le serpe d'or*, and *Obélix et Compagnie* all attack the so-called improvements of modern industrial society. The first is a building program that would destroy the forest around Asterix's village and transform their lifestyle from bucolic simplicity to Roman complexity. The second provides a commentary on urban sprawl. The final example portrays a nefarious capitalist economic scheme that ultimately rebounds on the

8 For other famous *Astérix* parodies, see esp. Girardin 2015.

Romans. These storylines demonstrate that *Astérix* is more than a comic, but a metaphor for an idyllic and proud French past that must be celebrated and defended, not forgotten in the name of progress.[9] As Russel B. Nye remarks, "Romans (who are not Italian) represent all that Goscinny and Uderzo dislike in contemporary life—bureaucracy, regimentation, the military mind. They cut down forests, pollute streams, cover Gaul with billboards, pave over the fields, build huge apartments and create instant slums" (1980, 191).

Paul Smith from the University of Nottingham remarks on the enduring popularity of *Astérix* vis-à-vis French history:

> The country may owe its name to the Franks, but when French republicans in the late 19th century were looking to establish the "origins" of their people, the Celtic Gauls fell easily to hand as the "first nation". It helped, of course, that the Gauls, as far as anyone knew, elected their chiefs and that druids met once a year in a kind of "national assembly". In telling the "*roman de la nation*" – the national story – the first lesson was: "Our ancestors the Gauls", and every schoolchild in France, including Goscinny and Uderzo, knew it. (Smith 2020)

By finding a specific, if fictional, vehicle of resistance to the opposition of Roman civilization versus Gallic barbarity, Goscinny and Uderzo have in effect fixed Asterix as a living example of barbarian indomitability. The magic potion that grants Asterix his strength allows Goscinny and Uderzo to repeatedly rewrite the story of the Gauls in 50 BCE. *Astérix* demonstrates that the Gauls never really went away, and that they are alive and well in the hearts and minds of Celtic peoples not only in France, but also around the world.[10]

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9 Pinet points to René Goscinny's background as a potential explanation for his nostalgic vision of a France less committed to post-war industrialization. Goscinny was born in France, raised in Argentina until age 19, and lived for a time in New York City: "In all, he spent seven years in the United States, a period that left a bitter taste, since he was not able to adjust to either the difficulty of finding work or what he saw as the standardization, impersonality, material-mindedness and loneliness of life in America" (150).

10 On the connection between Celtic identity and nationalism in Europe during the 19th century especially, see Cunliffe 1999. He writes of the "Celtomania of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century," and adds that "Beneath the romantic Celtism of the eighteenth century lay an undercurrent of nationalism which intensified and became even more explicit in the nineteenth century. The classical sources provide a galaxy of national heroes––Boudica in Britain, Vercingetorix in France, Ambiorix in Belgium, Viriathus in Iberia––all of whom could be used as symbols of national identity and freedom when required" (12-3).

3. *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* and the Construction of the Gauls

The inspiration for the characters and tropes in *Astérix* comes from one primary source in particular: Julius Caesar's *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* (*Commentaries on the Gallic War*; henceforth *The Gallic War*), written between 58 and 49 BCE as a first-hand account of his conquests in Gaul (cf. Alamagor 2019, 114). Julius Caesar is both the initial textual source for *Astérix* as well as the principal antagonist in the comic. References to the work are legion, and the comic addresses other famous moments in Caesar's career to promote the *Astérix* mythos. For example, *Astérix en Hispanie* begins in 45 BCE (unlike the rest of the Asterix volumes), right after Caesar's final victory over the Optimates in the Civil War at the Battle of Munda against Pompey's son Gnaeus Pompeius and his former lieutenant in the Gallic War, Titus Labienus. Goscinny and Uderzo's account of Caesar's victory *Astérix en Hispanie* begins as follows: "Un an après sa victoire de Thapsus sur les Pompéiens, César vient de battre les derniers survivants à Munda, soumettant toute L'Hispanie à L'Empiré de Rome... Avant de retourner à Rome où L'attend un triomphe, Jules César passe en revue sa vieille garde : la glorieuse xème Légion" (1969, 5). In addition to the references to the Civil War, Goscinny's reference to the 10th legion is on target. Caesar specifically points to this legion as his most trusted in *The Gallic War* (1917, I, 64-69).

Goscinny and Uderzo know *The Gallic War* very well, and subtle details do not escape them. For example, in *Le Domaine des Dieux*, Julius Caesar lays out his plan to defeat the Gauls through a Roman building program:

> Je vais vous faire quelques petits commentaires : en Gaule, après que Vercingétorix eut été vaincu, il déposa ses armes aux pieds du Glorieux chef...
> ...qui occupa toute la Gaule. Toute ? Non ! Un petit village peuplé d'irréductibles barbares osa, et ose encore lui résister ! [...]
> ...Ces Gaulois, aidés par une potion magique qui leur donne une force surhumaine, protégés par une forêt qui les nourrit, refusent la civilisation Romaine...
> J'ai décidé de les forcer à accepter cette civilisation ! La forêt sera détruite pour faire place à un parc naturel !
> Enfin, des immeubles habites par des Romains, entoureront le village, qui ne sera plus qu'une Amphoreville condamnée à s'adapter ou à disparaître ! (Goscinny and Uderzo 1971, 5).

These "petits commentaires" (an obvious reference to *Commentarii*) are accompanied by two panels of comic relief that poke fun at Julius Caesar's

famous references to himself in the third person in *The Gallic War*. One Roman asks another, "De qui parle-t-il ?" and another responds, "De lui. Il parle toujours de lui à la troisième personne." In the next panel, the first Roman says, "Il est formidable !" and Caesar asks, "Qui ça ?" The Roman responds "Ben... vous!" and Caesar says, "Ah!... Lui!" (Ibid. 5). This comic exchange invites the reader to laugh at the arrogant and condescending Caesar.

Goscinny also conforms Caesar's speech above to Julius Caesar's Latin. The ablative absolute with present or perfect participles is one of the more common ways to create a subordinate clause in Latin, and it is a favorite construction of Caesar's. The two phrases above from *Le Domaine des Dieux*, "aidés par une potion magique qui leur donne une force surhumaine, protégés par une forêt qui les nourrit," translated by Anthea Bell and Derek Hockridge in the English version (*The Mansions of the Gods*) as "with the help of a magic potion which gives them superhuman strength, and protected by a forest which provides them with food," imitate English translations of Caesar's Latin (Goscinny and Uderzo; translated by Bell and Hockridge 2012, Omnibus 6, 61). Attentive readers, especially those who grew up learning Latin through *The Gallic War* (a common teaching text since soon after Caesar's death; cf. Williams 2012), can spot the comic linguistic parody.

Goscinny and Uderzo clearly attend to the whole of Caesar's work. As such, *The Gallic War* merits attention as the literary context within which they portray their imagined aftermath of Caesar's conquest. For many scholars, including ancient critics like Cassius Dio, *The Gallic War* is Caesar's attempt to portray his ambitious and aggressive takeover in Gaul as a justified military incursion.[11] Caesar wanted to increase his popularity among the people back in Rome. This would help solidify his political position vis-à-vis the remaining member of the First Triumvirate, Gnaeus Pompey ("Pompey the Great") after the death of Marcus Licinius Crassus in 53 BCE. Caesar's clear and simple Latin prose, his general position that, despite their barbarity, the Gauls were a courageous people, and his abundant praise of the valor and bravery of his legions, all combine to portray him as a magnanimous and skilled leader. These

11 Notably, in his *Ῥωμαϊκὴ Ἱστορία* (*Historia* Romana), Cassius Dio reads Caesar's entrance into Gaul and subsequent conquest as a selfish act of personal ambition, not a peace-keeping mission to protect the Gauls from the Germanic tribes across the Rhine. See esp. Johnston 2019, 53-77.

rhetorical strategies were wildly successful with the people in Rome. Caesar made his name through the Gallic War and would celebrate the first of his four Roman Triumphs in 46 BCE in honor of his victories in Gaul.

It bears repeating that Caesar's ethnographic construction of the Gauls in *The Gallic War* as brave opponents supports his interests as a Roman statesman. After all, if he depicted the Gauls as weak and cowardly, his final victory at the Battle of Alesia in 52 BCE would hardly register with the people back in Rome. For Caesar, the Gauls are stereotypically "barbarian," with character traits that have colored historical reconstructions of them ever since. While other sources tell us that they are tall, blond, and strong with long hair and mustaches, Caesar focuses more on their emotional register and martial virtues: they are courageous, yet impetuous and reactive; they disdain subterfuge and trickery in favor of direct action.[12] They love their freedom (*libertas*) and do not want to be reduced to slavery (*servitutem*) by the Romans.[13]

Although Caesar praises the Gauls for these qualities, he does so in the midst of demonstrating how these traits routinely lead to problems when confronted with Caesar's superior patience, calculation, and organization of his legions. When reading *The Gallic War*, it is clear that Caesar never fails in the command of his legions, even if his sub-commanders do. He even takes advantage of his own legions' fears to demonstrate his exceptional leadership. The best example comes from Book I, when Caesar expands his rhetorical ethnographic construction of the brave and scary Gauls to the even more brave and more scary Germans across the Rhine. There, Caesar recounts how some Gallic townspeople and merchants at Vesontio (Besançon) told his legions of the physical size and fierceness of the Suebi under their chief Ariovistus. This news terrified many Romans, especially the young inexperienced officers (military tribunes; *tribuni militum*), who then looked for any excuse to go back to Rome (1917, I, 58-63). Caesar used the growing panic as an opportunity to give a speech that both shamed his men for their cowardice and roused their fighting spirit (Ibid. 63-65).

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12 Caesar's view of the Gauls appears to have changed over time. For example, in Book VII he comments on the "summae genus" ("remarkable ingenuity") of the Gauls' during the Siege of Avaricum (52 BCE) VII, 22, pp. 410-413. For a detailed description of Caesar's ethnographic construction of the Gauls and the Germans, cf. Riggsby 2006, 47-71.

13 The most striking speech in defense of a proud, free Gaul comes from the Arvernian noble Critognatus (Caesar 1917, VII, 490-493).

Except for Asterix himself, Goscinny and Uderzo's depictions of the Gauls embrace the stereotypical characteristics of the northern and western European tribal peoples. They are hardy and strong, mustached, and invariably argumentative. Asterix has the classic mustache and the blond hair as well as a winged helmet, but he is described as a "petit guerrier à l'esprit malin, à l'intelligence vive."[14] His short stature and savvy ability to solve problems without resorting to violence subverts the readers' expectations for a Gallic hero, perhaps endearing him even more to his readership (cf. Almagor 2016, 124). As for the winged helmet, this feature may be inspired by references in Diodorus Siculus, who also mentions horned helmets like those worn by Asterix's best friend Obelix.[15] The role of the gigantic and temperamental Gaul who terrifies the legionaries is played by Obelix himself. He is "Livreur de menhirs de son état, grand amateur de sangliers et de belles bagarres." Obelix loves going on adventures and fighting Romans, but has a soft spot for his little dog, Idéfix.[16] Unlike Asterix, Obelix does not need the magic potion that everyone else in the village does because he was dropped into a cauldron of the magic potion as a child. This happy accident granted him superhuman strength as a permanent feature. His constant complaint that Asterix and others in the village get to drink it while he does not is a running gag within the *Astérix* universe.

Other characters fit the common stereotypes of the Gallic past as inspired by *The Gallic War* and other sources. The druid Panoramix conforms to romantic artistic renderings of druids in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He is an old, wise wizard with a long white beard (cf. Cunliffe 1999, 12). The village

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14 The front matter of each volume usually includes brief descriptions of Asterix, Obelix, the druid Panoramix, the bard Assurancetourix, and Chief Abraracourcix. This front matter also includes a map of Gaul that highlights Asterix's village and the Roman camps around it.

15 Like the horned helmet, the winged helmet is an overcharged symbol within European culture. It could be a reference to the Roman god Mercury, which Caesar claims as the high god among the Gauls: "Deum maxime Mercurium colunt" ("Among the gods, they most worship Mercury") VI, 340-341. Both horned and winged helmets also represent 19th century artistic efforts to romanticize the Gauls, Goths, Vikings, and other premodern northern European cultures.

16 In this case, the French pun "idée fixe," or "fixed idea" refers to Idéfix's obsession with trees. Fans of *Astérix* admire Anthea Bell's English translation of Idéfix into "Dogmatix," as it stays true to the French spirit of the pun.

chief, Abraracourcix is described as "majestueux, courageux, ombrageux, le vieux guerrier est respecté par ses hommes, craint par ses ennemis." The only thing that he fears is the sky falling on his head. This trope of the "hot-tempered" Gaul appears again and again in *Astérix* with great comedic effect, yet it never ends in defeat for Asterix or the other Gauls. Instead, Roman prefects looking to curry favor with Julius Caesar fail in their conniving schemes to control the village. These greedy and gluttonous Roman patricians and their underlings are the perfect foils to the simple and honorable Gauls.[17]

Religion and other elements of Gallic culture come up in *The Gallic War* as well, but usually for the purpose of building up the Gauls as a brave yet alien people. For example, within Book VI of *The Gallic War*, Julius Caesar digresses from his usual commentary and spends some time recounting elements of Gallic culture (1917, VI, 332-355). This section is noteworthy because here scholars rely on Caesar for a basic outline of Gallic tribal culture in their own historical reconstructions. Caesar famously writes about what has become known as the "Wicker Man," a feature of Gallic human sacrifice. This was allegedly the practice of putting criminals (and sometimes innocents) inside a hollow wooden figure made of twigs and branches and then burning them alive (Ibid. 340-341). Despite this sensational imagery, Caesar mentions it in passing, almost as a fascinating curiosity, and perhaps only to remind his readers back in Rome of how terrifying and alien the Gauls could be. Overall, descriptions of these kinds of religious and cultural practices are not a dominant feature of *The Gallic War*. Caesar does not expand on the Wicker Man or any other macabre element of Celtic/Gallic culture, including the well-documented practice of headhunting. Not surprisingly, after this brief interlude in Book VI, Caesar returns to his usual commentary on the events of his conquest.

Ancient cultural and religious practices are rather muted in *Astérix* as well. There is a mention of the alleged Gallic practice of cannibalism, and that comes from the new team of Jean-Yves Ferri and Didier Conrad,

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17 Gracchus Garovirus, the Roman governor of Condatum, is an excellent example. He appears in *Astérix chez les Helvètes* (1970) as the picture of gluttony. Morbidly obese and always filthy from his Roman orgies, he does not send proper tribute to Rome, keeping most of the revenue from the province to support his lavish lifestyle. He poisons the Roman Quaestor Claudius Malosinus to avoid detection by Caesar.

who make a passing reference in *Le Papyrus de César*. Upon hearing the cacophonous horn ("Beuglophon") of the village bard Assurancetourix, a legionary covers his ears and remarks, "On m'avait dit Qu'ils faisaient des sacrifices humains!" (Ferri and Conrad 2015, 40). This rumor comes from the speech of the Arvernian warlord Critognatus in *The Gallic War*. In this, the longest speech in the commentaries, Critognatus pleads with his fellow Gauls to do whatever it takes to defend the freedom of Gaul at Alesia, even if it means cannibalizing their own people to survive (Caesar 1917, VI, 490-493). This is hardly an admission of a widespread cultural practice. Further, the stone menhirs delivered by Obelix and the sickles of the druids in *Astérix* possibly connect to ancient Celtic religious practices, but they are only deployed generically in the comic.[18] In *Obélix et Compagnie*, even the druid Panoramix does not know the purpose of the menhirs (Goscinny and Uderzo 1976, 30). When *Astérix* does address religious practices more overtly, the comic pokes fun at the Gallic and Roman obsession with divination and augury. For example, in *Le Devin*, Asterix and Panoramix see through the confidence man *qua* soothsayer (*le devin*) who visits the village and makes all sorts of outlandish predictions for the more gullible villagers, including Obelix. As usual, the plot turns on the antagonists in the end, and Asterix saves the day for his tribe against the Romans, who are victims of their own superstitious folly.

Like Caesar, Goscinny and Uderzo devote a great deal of attention to the bravery of the Gauls. In fact, they devote an entire volume, *Astérix chez les Belges*, to a competition between Asterix's Armoricans and the Belgians to demonstrate which group is the bravest of Rome's enemies. The provenance of this plot is Caesar's claim at the beginning of *The Gallic War* that the Belgae are the most courageous of the three main groups of Gauls: the Belgae, the Aquitani, and the Celtae (Caesar, 1917 I, 2-3). Despite Panoramix's wise advice

18 In *Le serpe d'or*, the druid Panoramix has broken his golden sickle. This could endanger the village, because the mistletoe he uses for the invincibility potion must be cut with a golden sickle. Asterix and Obelix set out for Lutetia to buy a new one from Obelix's cousin, the sicklesmith Amérix. The use of a golden sickle to cut mistletoe references a passage in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* (XVI, 95) in which Pliny recounts a Celtic ritual of oak and mistletoe: druids, dressed in white, climb oak trees and cut the mistletoe that grow on the trees with a golden sickle. Two white bulls are sacrificed to please the gods, and the mistletoe is used in an elixir to grant fertility and protect its drinkers from poisons.

that the village should just mind their own business, Chief Abraracourcix is determined to prove that his Armoricans are the bravest people that Julius Caesar has ever faced. After meeting the Belgians, both groups decide to show off their respective abilities. They destroy Roman camps and beat up the legionaries in their stereotypically straight-forward Gallic smash-and-bash style. Later, at a Belgian feast with copious amounts of beer and meat, the two tribes eventually settle on a competition. After more Roman camps are destroyed by the two tribes, Asterix and Obelix go to Caesar and ask him to settle the tribal dispute once and for all so that everyone can just go home. Enraged at their request, Caesar screams, "J'y serai à ce rendez-vous, avec mes légions, et je vous écraserai tous ! Je vous anéantirai ! Je vous étriperai ! Je vous massacrerai !!! Et vous saurez que le plus brave de tous, c'est César, et rien que César !!!" (Goscinny and Uderzo 1979, 37). The Armoricans and the Belgians eventually unite to fight off the Romans, and the episode ends in defeat for the poor Roman legions. After the battle, their respective chiefs, Abraracourcix and Gueuselambix, stop Caesar on the road and ask him to finally settle the competition. The exasperated Roman leader shouts, "les plus braves, je ne sais pas ! Ce que je peux vous dire, c'est que vous êtes aussi fous les uns que les autres !!!" (Ibid. 46).

The druids receive positive press in *The Gallic War*, but mostly as an educated social class of teachers and tribal leaders. In fact, Caesar's most important ally among the powerful Aedui tribe is the druid Diviciacus, who serves as his spokesperson. In Book I Caesar reckons him as one of the leaders of the Aedui along with one Liscus, the "Vergobret" (chief judge) at the time (1917, I, 25). Although Caesar does not mention that he is a druid, we know that Diviciacus visited Rome in 63 BCE to ask for help against the Sequani and Arverni as well as the Suebi from across the Rhine. As Cicero's guest, Diviciacus apparently impressed the Roman orator with his knowledge of augury and divination (Cicero 1923, I, 321-323). Caesar writes of the esteem with which the druids are held by their fellow Gauls:

> In omni Gallia eorum hominum, qui aliquo sunt numero atque honore, genera sunt duo…Sed de his duobus generibus alterum est druidum, alterum equitum. Illi rebus divinis intersunt, sacrificia publica ac privata procurant, religiones interpretantur: ad hos magnus adulescentium numerus disciplinae causa concurrit, magnoque hi sunt apud eos honore. Nam fere de omnibus controversiis publicis privatisque constituunt, et, si quod est admissum facinus, si caedes facta, si de hereditate, de finibus controversia est, idem

decernunt, praemia poenasque constituunt; si qui aut privatus aut populus eorum decreto non stetit, sacrificiis interdicunt. Haec poena apud eos est gravissima. (1917, VI, 335-336)[19]

For Caesar, the druids are an educated priestly class who serve as leaders, teachers, and spiritual guides. They rule the Gauls together with the knights.

Like Diviciacus, Panoramix is a respected figure among the Gauls. Within the universe of *Astérix*, he is portrayed as a village mentor, and he often goes off to cut the mistletoe with his golden sickle and brew the magic potion that grants temporary invincibility to the Gauls. Whenever Asterix is about to go on an adventure, Panoramix makes sure that Asterix is supplied with this potion. He also uses his knowledge for healing. For example, in *Astérix chez les Helvètes*, the governor of Condatum, Gracchus Garovirus, poisons the Roman quaestor Claudius Malosinus to avoid being exposed for failing to send tax revenue to Rome. Aware of the druid's reputation as a skilled healer, Malosinus sends for him, and Panoramix remarks, "Je dois toujours aider les maladies ; les Romains comme les autres," to which Obelix replies, "Moi je n'aime pas quand les Romains sont maladies ; ils sont plus mous, que d'habitude" (Goscinny and Uderzo 1970, 14). Panoramix tends to the sick, Roman or not, while Obelix remains the anti-Roman barbarian brawler.

Panoramix even reverses the practice of hostageship among the Gauls and the Romans to help Claudius Malosinus. Hostageship, a common practice among premodern peoples, ensured good behavior among the losers of military conquests (cf. Walker 2005). Tenuous allies sometimes exchanged hostages to ensure good faith in alliances, but more often victors in wars demanded hostages of the losers. These hostages were often members of the ruler's immediate or extended family, to be left alive so long as the losers obeyed their new overlords. This is particularly relevant in the case of Julius Caesar, for

19 "Throughout Gaul there are two classes of persons of definite account and dignity… Of the two classes above mentioned one consists of Druids, the other of knights. The former are concerned with divine worship, the due performance of sacrifices, public and private, and the interpretation of ritual questions: a great number of young men gather about them for the sake of instruction and hold them in great honour. In fact, it is they who decide in almost all disputes, public and private; and if any crime has been committed, or murder done, or there is any disposes about succession or boundaries, they also decide it, determining rewards and penalties: if any person or people does not abide by their decision, they ban such from sacrifice, which is their heaviest penalty."

whom hostages often play an important political role. As M. James Moscovich notes, "Of the more 100 Gallic, German and British tribes mentioned by name in the b.G., 37 are specifically recorded as having rendered hostages to Caesar or his lieutenants" (Moscovich 1979, 122).

In his exchange with Gracchus Garovirus over his pledge to heal the quaestor Claudius Malosinus, Panoramix lays down the following condition for the trip to Switzerland that Asterix and Obelix must make to find the ingredient that he needs to heal the poisoned Roman.[20] Turning to Claudius Malosinus, he says, "Je mets une condition: tu viendres chez nous en otage, jusqu'au retour de mes amis." Gracchus Garovirus interjects with, "Ah ça non! Jamais!" while the sick quaestor replies, "D'accord, druide." Panoramix turns to Gracchus Garovirus: "Et je te préviens! Si mes amis ne reviennent pas, l'otage sera execute!" A confused Asterix whispers to Panoramix, "Ce n'est pas notre genre de prendre des otages…" to which Panoramix replies softly, "Cet homme, Malosinus, a été empoisonné. S'il reste ici, il a peu de chances de survivre; dans notre village il sera à l'abri des meurtriers" (Goscinny and Uderzo 1970, 16-17). Thus, under the pretext of taking a hostage, Panoramix looks out for the well-being of the Roman quaestor. Here Goscinny and Uderzo reverse the concept of hostageship in *The Gallic War* by transforming it into a stratagem used by Panoramix to save the Roman questor from the dissolute and murderous Gracchus Garovirus.

Astérix is particularly indebted to *The Gallic War* in *Le Papyrus de César* (2015). This is the 36th volume of the series, and the second written by Jean-Yves Ferri and illustrated by Didier Conrad. The premise is that Caesar has written his *Commentaries on the Gallic War* and has included a personally embarrassing chapter on his failed attempts at conquering Asterix's village: "Revers svbis face avx irredvctibles Gavlois d'Armoriqve" (Ferri and Conrad 2015, 5). Caesar's publisher Bonus Promoplus convinces him that he should leave out the chapter, because the Gauls are illiterate and therefore will not dispute the omission of their story from Roman history. When Bonus Promoplus orders all the scroll copies of that chapter destroyed, one Numidian scribe, Bigdatha, escapes with a scroll of the chapter, because "il se dit solidaire du peuple Gaulois et refuse qu'on censure un chaiptre clé de son histoire" (Ibid. 10). He hands it off to

20 The ingredient, of course, is the Silver Star, or Edelweiss. Many regard Edelweiss as the national flower of Switzerland.

"l'activiste Gaulois" named Doublepolémix (most certainly a parody of Julian Assange), who delivers the scroll to the Gauls of Asterix's village in Armorica.

At first, Chief Abraracourcix chooses to ignore the news that Caesar has censored his own war commentaries, but after a tongue lashing from his wife Bonemine over the village's place in history, he decides to take the threat to Gallic history seriously. The wise Panoramix chooses a course of action:

Dans ce cas, je ne vois qu'une solution : Le druide Archéoptérix qui vit dans la forêt des Carnutes !
Archéoptérix est le gardien secret de nos connaissances. Il gravera ce papyrus dans sa mémoire, afin qu'il soit transmis, comme le veut notre t radition, par la bouche-à-oreille ! (Ibid. 18)

Compare what Panoramix says to what Caesar writes in Book VI of *The Gallic War* about the oral traditions of the druids:

Magnum ibi numerum versuum ediscere dicuntur. Itaque annos nonnulli vicenos in disciplina permanent. Neque fas esse existimant ea litteris mandare, cum in reliquis fere rebus, publicis privatisque rationibus Graecis litteris utantur. Id mihi duabus de causis instituisse videntur, quod neque in vulgum disciplinam efferri velint neque eos, qui discunt, litteris confisos minus memoriae studere: quod fere plerisque accidit, ut praesidio litterarum diligentiam in perdiscendo ac memoriam remittant. (1917, VI, 338-339)[21]

According to Caesar, the druids use their memories to preserve their traditions instead of writing things down. The point of *Le Papyrus de César*, of course, is that the Romans lost the scroll precisely because it was in writing. Had they been more like the Gauls, they could have prevented the entire episode. This clever reversal privileges older, oral traditions over newer technologies like writing. In fact, the entire volume parodies the alleged advances of modern communication technologies with Roman analogues. For example, instead of

21 "Report says that in the schools of the Druids they learn by heart a great number of verses, and therefore some persons remain twenty years under training. And they do not think it proper to commit these utterances to writing, although in almost all other matters, and in their public and private accounts, they make use of Greek letters. I believe that they have adopted the practice for two reasons––that they do not wish the rule to become common property, nor those who learn the rule to rely on writing and so neglect the cultivation of the memory; and, in fact, it does usually happen that the assistance of writing tends to relax the diligence of the student and the action of the memory."

the painfully slow Roman postal service (the *cursus publicus*), the Romans use carrier pigeons to comic effect (Ferri and Conrad 2015, 15-16).
Within the narrative, Panoramix, Asterix, and Obelix find Archéoptérix in the magical Forest of the Carnutes, a place in central France that Caesar mentions as the meeting place for the druids in Book VI: "Hi certo anni tempore in finibus Carnutum, quae regio totius Galliae media habetur, considunt in loco consecrato" (1917, VI, 336-337).[22] In another reference to Caesar's ethnographic reflections in *The Gallic War*, Asterix, Obelix, and Panoramix see unicorns within the forest, and one even chases off the Roman spies who are following them (Ferri and Conrad 2015, 27).[23] When the Gauls finally arrive at the oak of the venerable Archéoptérix, the old druid eventually commits the scroll to memory.

Meanwhile, the Romans have decided to march on the village of the Gauls, seemingly vulnerable without Asterix, Obelix, and Panoramix. The bard Assurancetourix manages to get a message to Asterix and his friends through his musical instrument, the "Beuglophon," and the heroes hurry back to defend their village. After much comic violence (especially when Obelix arrives) the scroll is torn in half in the fight between Bonus Promoplus and Doublepolémix. As Bonus Promoplus yells, "Tu ne l'auras pas ! Ce papyrus appartient â César !" Julius Caesar arrives right on cue with the biblical line from the Gospel of Matthew (22:21): "il faut rendre â César ce qui lui appartient!" (Ibid. 45). Caesar promptly makes a deal with Asterix to recover the other half of the missing scroll: he will not persecute Gallic "colporteurs" (the press), and he will release all the scribes imprisoned by Promoplus. Asterix replies, "Nous n'avons que faire de tes écrits. Pour nous, seule la parole compte !" (Ibid. 46).

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22 "These Druids, at a certain time of the year, meet within the borders of the Carnutes, whose territory is reckoned as the centre of all Gaul, and sit in conclave in a consecrated spot."
23 In a passage that has sparked the imagination to this day, Caesar writes about the creatures that dwell in the Hercynian forests in Germany: "Est bos cervi figura, cuius a media fronte inter aures unum cornu exsistit excelsius magisque directum his, quae nobis nota sunt, cornibus: ab eius summo sicut palmae ramique late diffunduntur. Eadem est feminae marisque natura, eadem forma magnitudoque cornuum"; "There is an ox shaped like a stag, from the middle of whose forehead between the ears stands forth a single horn, taller and straighter than the horns we know. From its top branches spread out just like open hands. The main features of female and of male are the same, the same the shape and the size of the horns," VI, 350-353. Because both males and females have horns, the consensus among scholars is that the animal in question is the reindeer.

Ferri and Conrad end *Le Papyrus de César* with a post-script in a series of panels that celebrates the oral traditions of the Gauls while also paying homage to René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo:

> Le souvenir de ce chapitre racontant les revers de César en Armorique s'est-il perdu au fil des âges ?... Pas sûr !
> On dit que son contenu se serait transmis comme prévu, de druide en druide...
> ...et qu'en dépit de quelques approximations...
> ...il serait parvenu aux oreilles de deux scribes modernes et passionnés qui en auraient note tous les détails...
> Et en auraient tiré une série d'histoires amusantes.... Mais bien sûr, ce ne sont que des "on dit" ! (Ibid. 48)

In the panels the reader sees a druid dressed in stereotypical Parisian clothes sitting down in a café and speaking with René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo. Goscinny says, "Tu entends ça, Bébert ?" and Uderzo exclaims, "Fabuleux, René !" (Ibid. 48). And so, within the *Astérix* universe, Julius Caesar's missing scroll from *The Gallic War* has become an ancient oral tradition that tells the true story of the indomitable Gauls, no matter what is written in the history books.

4. The Everlasting Feast of a Fixed Astérix

Astérix is a light-hearted comic that asks "What if?" about the French and Roman past, and it does not take itself too seriously.[24] As the anonymous author of an editorial in *The Guardian* puts it: "Part of Asterix's appeal lies in the gentle prodding of European national stereotypes: the fondue- and cuckoo-clock-obsessed Swiss, the milky-tea-drinking British and the beer-swilling Belgians. But while the parodies are occasionally mischievous, they are also humane" ("In Praise of... Asterix" 2009). The plethora of national stereotypes, puns, and caricatures of *Astérix* induce laughter across the globe in multiple languages. The continued popularity of the comic speaks to the experiences of a readership who see the funny side of themselves and their history in the

24 *Astérix* has even inspired archaeologists to get in on the fun of speculative history. Cf. Keys 1993.

cosmopolitan world of *Astérix*. The comic rewards reading and rereading, because, as Peter Kessler explains, "readers can go back to his adventures time after time and find new jokes to savour" (1995, 70). Mark Tweedale adds that *Astérix* "really rewards the slower read. There's so much detail to explore, little stories going on in the background and visual puns and recurring gags, especially in the feasts and fight scenes" (2020).

For their part, Goscinny and Uderzo were all about the laughs, and worked hard to deliver; the author and illustrator team usually produced one or two volumes per year until the death of Goscinny in 1977. However, they rejected scholarly analyses of their comic, especially as it became more popular and *Astérix* went global through translations. As Russel B. Nye points out, "Goscinny always denied the 'Asterix' had deeper symbolic, ideological, or social meanings. 'I am essentially an entertainer,' he said. 'I am not a moralist. I don't give lessons, I am not to be taken seriously, and I like to make people laugh.'" Nye goes on to list multiple interpretive stances that incensed the author, including readings of the Gauls as French socialists and the Romans as the capitalist state (1980, 188-190).

Nonetheless, scholars have studied and will continue to study *Astérix* as a cultural artifact. Like Frankenstein's monster, *Astérix* has taken on a life of its own beyond the intentions of its creators. In his commentary on the banquet at the end of *Le Fils d'Astérix*, his third solo volume after the death of Goscinny, Uderzo discusses the cultural inertia of the comic:

> Actually, every time I finish an album I feel that it is the last Asterix adventure. But this is a big ending: the Gauls are friends with Caesar and the banquet takes place on a ship instead of in the Village. I came in for a lot of criticism over that. The readers insist on the traditions being maintained. It's very difficult, because when I start a new adventure, I have to create something fresh as well as keeping all the leit-motifs. If I leave out the pirates, or the fish fights, or any other traditional ingredient, people complain. It's not easy. But it's a job. (Kessler, 1995, 53)

As I demonstrate below, the banquet is perhaps the most important tradition in *Astérix*, but also the final element of a recurring narrative pattern that is far more significant and influential than the humorous leitmotifs noted by Uderzo. This plot pattern runs throughout the *Astérix* series, makes a deeper claim upon its readers, and might explain their insistence on its continued narrative presence: Asterix, Obelix, and the Gauls routinely defeat the Romans

and spare their Armorican village the supposed benefits of Roman civilization. And so, traditions are maintained and critical analysis abounds.

Uderzo's focus on the tradition of the village banquet is telling, as this feast is perhaps the most sacred moment of every *Astérix* adventure. Like so many other elements in the *Astérix* mythos, it has roots in the classical literature, and Goscinny and Uderzo have transformed it into the symbol of an everlasting happy ending (cf. Almagor 2016, 119). With a few exceptions (including *Le Fils d'Astérix*), nearly all of the thirty-eight *Astérix* volumes conclude with panels of the Gauls feasting in their village.[25] Below, I cite four examples:

> Et, durant toute la nuit, sous le ciel étoile et la luna brillante, les Gaulois fêtèrent leurs héros, vainquers de leurs ennemis, grâce à la ruse, la magie et la protection des dieux... (*Astérix le Gaulois* 1961, 48)

> Et, non loin des ruines Romaines, dans une vraie clairière de la forêt, fréquentée par les sangliers et les corneilles, nos Gaulois réunis pour un de leurs traditionnels banquets, célèbrent une nouvelle victoire, une victoire sur les Romains, une victoire sur le temps qui passe, inexorablement... (*Le Domaine des Dieux* 1971, 47)

> Le soir venu, ces humains ont tout oublié. Et, sous le ciel étoilé qui les recouvre, sans avoir, toutefois, l'intention de leur tomber sur la tête, nos Gaulois se sont réunis pour un de leurs traditionnels banquets, qui célèbre, entre autres, la fin de la zizanie. (*La Zizanie* 1970, 48)

> Mais tous ces soucis compliqués fondent sous les étoiles comme neige au soleil et c'est l'esprit tranquille, que les Gaulois fêtent leur amitié retrouvée... (*Obélix et Compagnie* 1976, 48)

Uderzo's art depicts Gauls looking cozy and content as they happily feast around a bonfire, usually under the light of a full moon.

The very act of feasting merits a closer examination here, and we can speculate as to why readers might look forward to this recurring happy ending

25 The exceptions are *Astérix et la rentrée gauloise* (2003) and *Le Livre d'or l'anniversaire d'Asterix et Obelix* (2009). *Astérix et la rentrée gauloise* (2003) is a series of fourteen short stories; thirteen of these previously appeared in *Pilote* or other venues, and only two (*En 35 avant J.C.* and *En 50 avant J.C.*) end with the usual feast. *Le Livre d'or l'anniversaire d'Asterix et Obelix* is s series of short stories that celebrates the 50th anniversary of *Astérix*. As noted above, *Le Fils d'Astérix* (1983) ends in a feast, but on Cleopatra's galley off the coast of Armorica.

in *Astérix*. One explanation might be found by looking through the lens of plot fulfillment. Joseph Campbell's work on mythology around the world is helpful, as his concept of the monomyth (the "Hero's Journey") may account for the satisfaction that readers take in the comedy's resolution. For Campbell, the final step of the hero journey is the sharing of the elixir that restores the world: "at the return threshold the transcendental powers must remain behind; the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread (return, resurrection). The boon that he brings restores the world" (Campbell 2004, 228). Goscinny and Uderzo's final panels of each volume of *Astérix* represent this return to the restored ordinary world. There are no more Romans to fight, no more journeys to make, and therefore no need for Asterix to drink the magic potion. All is well in the village again and again at the end of each volume.

Another potential explanation for the allure of *Astérix* among its readers may lie in the cultural significance of human feasting as a symbol of shared human values, or at least their most ideal forms. Charles Stanish, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at UCLA, reflects on the role of feasting in the development of civilization:

> Both bread and wine are products of settled society. They represent the power to control nature and create civilization, converting the wild into the tamed, the raw into the cooked—and their transformation cannot be easily done alone. The very act of transforming the wild into the civilized is a social one, requiring many people to work together… Archaeologists have discovered that the consumption of food and drink in ritually prescribed times and places – known technically as feasting – is one of the cornerstones of heightened sociality and cooperation throughout human history. (Stanish 2018)

Though Stanish's own work focuses on the premodern peoples of the Andes, his point may be relevant here. Goscinny and Uderzo have certainly ritualized the feasts of Asterix and his fellow Gauls at the end of each volume.

As noted above, feasting peacefully around the bonfire conjures up a host of positive feelings for readers, as eating and sharing a meal together is one of the most fundamental elements of the collective human experience. Michael Dietler discusses the role of the feast in representing the positive elements of community life. He argues, "as public ritual events, in contrast to daily activity, feasts provide an arena for the highly condensed symbolic representation of social relations. Like all rituals, they express idealized concepts, that is the way people believe relations exist or should exist rather than how they are necessarily

manifested in daily activity" (Dietler 1998, 89). In other words, feasts affirm the most noble values of the community. We see this in Asterix's village at the end of each volume. Despite their differences, the Gauls, from Chief Abraracourcix to the village fishmonger Ordralfabétix and his blacksmith friend Cetoautomatix, all feast in celebration of their heroes and their beloved community.[26] Even Asterix and Obelix are known to quarrel during their adventures, but they always make up in the end.

Moreover, because they are frozen in time in 50 BCE within the Late Republic, the Gauls represent a certain point of civilization vis-à-vis the Roman culture around them. On the one hand, they are not early humans, and they are not nomadic hunters and gatherers. Their village demonstrates economic, social, and political distinctions, with an elite class (Chief Abraracourcix and the druid Panoramix) as well as a class of tradespeople and artisans. When not helping Asterix, Obelix works as a menhir delivery man.[27] On the other hand, they lack the complex political structure, technological sophistication, and bureaucratic efficiency typical of the Romans. But, in their relative simplicity, they also avoid Roman problems.

Goscinny and Uderzo celebrate this small-town simplicity in every volume. For them, the Gauls may even represent something akin to the Enlightenment vision of the "noble savage," for whom the political, economic, and cultural trappings of "advanced" civilizations represent at best a foreign, life-draining alternative way of life. At worst, of course, these civilizations attack and annihilate the cultural expressions of indigenous peoples through their colonial aggression. Within the study of Roman and French history, Romanization represents a historical process probably somewhere in between these extremes, a process that led to the creation of Gallo-Roman culture over several centuries. *Astérix* reverses the historical polarities of the Romanization process described

26 As noted above by Uderzo, a notable gag that runs through the entire *Astérix* series are the "fish fights." Within the *Astérix* universe, there is a rivalry between the village blacksmith Cetautomatix and his friend, the fishmonger Ordralfabétix. They are friends most of the time, but when Cetautomatix criticizes the freshness of Ordralfabétix's fish, comic hilarity ensues, usually with fish being thrown around.

27 Although Goscinny and Uderzo certainly do not portray Abraracourcix and Panoramix as somehow better than the rest of the villagers in *Astérix*, their roles certainly echo Caesar's distinction between the two noble classes (the druids and the knights) and the rest of the Gauls, whom he presents as little more than slaves to the ruling class (1917, VI, 334-341).

by Theodore Mommsen. It is a universe peopled by noble barbarians in their village and dissolute Romans in their fortified camps and cities. Barbarian is good and Roman civilization is bad.

The Gauls in *Astérix* look and act like stereotypical barbarian warriors often enough; they squabble and fight among themselves almost as often as they fight the Romans. But unlike the usually distant and conniving Roman magistrates (Caesar and Cleopatra are notable exceptions), the Gauls are a close-knit community, a family even. For example, in *La Zizanie*, the Romans imbed a noted troublemaker into Asterix's village, and he promptly starts sowing division and strife among the villagers. After much comic mayhem and even accusations that Asterix is a traitor, the Gauls (led by Asterix and Panoramix) figure out the ploy and defeat the Romans. Their feast ends in the usual fashion, with the Gauls coming together to celebrate "la fin de la zizanie" (1970, 48).

Finally, as good students of their druid Panoramix, the Gauls respect the natural world around them and resist the "modern" trappings of Roman life. Goscinny and Uderzo quickly erase the Roman apartment complex at the end of *Le Domaine des Dieux*; Panoramix uses his magic acorns to regrow the forest around their village within one panel: "À la tombée de la nuit, la forêt a repris ses droits; seules quelques ruines témoignent que le domaine des dieux a failli exister..." (Goscinny and Uderzo 1971, 47). Based on their mockery of urban life throughout the series, one may imagine that Goscinny and Uderzo lamented the housing boom in France in the decades following World War II. Their vision of a georgic France certainly conflicts with that of the controversial Swiss-French architect and urban planner Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (1887-1965), aka Le Corbusier. The comic strategy certainly delighted and still delights readers nostalgic for the France that existed before the Second World War.

Astérix rewrites the history of the Gauls by fixing them in time. Although expressed a bit differently at the end of each volume, the everlasting feast is the portrayal of the Gauls that Goscinny and Uderzo want their readers to remember. Drawing largely upon the stereotypes attributed to them by Julius Caesar in *The Gallic War*, *Astérix* presents the Gauls as good honest folk, brave in battle and ready to help their allies. The cartoon violence never ends in death, only humiliated legionaries or Roman allies bemoaning their encounters with Asterix and Obelix. There are no references to the Wicker Man, head-hunting, or other unseemly Celtic religious practices that might obfuscate this romantic vision of the Gauls.

Goscinny and Uderzo long for a French past that perhaps once existed, but now can only be imagined. In the name of this past, they imbed biting social commentary within the comic that lampoons the alleged failures of the modern world and its political figures. *Astérix* criticizes unbridled capitalism, urban sprawl, and other advances within contemporary French society. Goscinny and Uderzo position their readers in plots that code the Gauls as heroes and the Romans as villains or hapless bureaucrats (and therefore also villains). And these Romans are not just the Late Republicans within the comic. They are also the modernizing Romans that Sylvie Uderzo fought in the courts when her father sold 60% of his shares in *Astérix* to the publishing group Hachette. The Gauls are those who defend an older model of French society that is natural, local, sustainable, and certainly less corporate and less bureaucratic.

Readers of *Astérix*, like premodern seafarers who found their way by looking to the Pole Star, navigate the plots of these stories by means of this fixed *Astérix.* They identify with this "little star" and his friends because of their bravery, loyalty, and genuine concern for each other as a community. Readers heartily support the indomitable Gauls in their proud defiance of Julius Caesar and his Roman legions. They know that there will always be a feast to celebrate the latest victory of Asterix and Obelix.

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