Vassar College

Forgotten Tongues: Uncovering Gallic Orality in Greco-Roman Sources

by Maeve Smith

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Greek and Roman Studies

Thesis Advisor:

Rachel Friedman

May 2024

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

This thesis would not have been possible without the support of many helping hands. I give many thanks to:

my family for molding me into the individual I am today. You have always encouraged me to follow my passions with the affirmation that I could accomplish anything I set my mind to. Thank you to my parents and grandmother for listening to me explain this thesis at length.

my dear friends who have stuck by me and kept me sane through it all.

my thesis prep classmates, Margot, Riley, and Kendall, for their patience in helping me wrangle my scattered thoughts into something cohesive.

my professors in the Greek and Roman Studies department. Thank you to: Rachel Friedman for helping me orient myself within my thesis, Barbara Olsen for being my long-term advisor in all things GRST and knee injury related, Curtis Dozier for changing the way I think about the field as a whole, Carl Rice for his kindness as a professor, supervisor, and editor, & to Del Maticic and Carolyn Tobin for teaching me Latin.

my cat for providing emotional support through a turbulent thesis process.

my counselor, Vinny, for his empathetic listening and sage-like guidance.

the Crafted Kup, barista Will, and my housemate Naomi for providing a welcoming space to work on my thesis every Sunday (except Easter).

the media that I played in the background while writing. Shoutout to: Ambient Horizons Study with Me in Skyrim Pomodoro Timer on YouTube, Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*, Branko Mataja, and Kendrick Lamar.

the Vassar Libraries for procuring the absurd amount of obscure ILLs I have requested.

Introduction

In the realm of history, there is always an underlying decision regarding which stories are 'worthy' of being told. As the old axiom goes, history is written by the victors, and often the stories the victorious wish to tell are those of their own successes. The events, records, and accounts that continue on to the next era are either decided by sheer luck or by deliberate preservation, and oftentimes those who decide what is worth saving--or even recording in the first place--are the 'victors.' It is difficult enough to preserve your perspective through the years without the structures and power to do so, and even harder to recount your story if it somehow challenges the dominant narrative. It is hardest, of course, if you didn't survive to tell your story at all.

This is a story centered around loss. The loss of thousands of Gallic lives in the name of Roman expansion and dictatorial glory. The loss of irrecoverable ancient practices and forms of knowledge. The loss of family homes, farms, and settlements. The lost war against Roman imperial power by disparate Gallic tribes united as one in the face of domination and 'perpetual servitude.'

This is a thesis about probing that loss. As anthropologist Carole Crumley succinctly says in her introduction to *Celtic Social Structure*, "we have too much Roman opinion and too little Celtic evidence."[1] The Celts were a predominantly orality-centered culture, favoring vocal communication over textual. While the oral nature of the Gallic language and Roman epistemicide have effectively rendered the indigenous knowledge of Gaul lost to time, there is evidence of potential Gallic conversational and linguistic practices in extant Greco-Roman sources that describe characteristics common to those in Gaul. This evidence is inherently etic and must be examined with due scholarly skepticism. Not only were the authors of these sources

[1] Crumley, *Celtic Social Structure*, vi.

external to the society in question, acting as outsiders looking in, but they were particularly hostile outsiders considering the extent to which Roman authors in particular hated, feared, patronized, and scorned the Gauls. However, by using theoretical foundations that examine common linguistic attributes of primarily oral cultures and comparing these possible traits to both Gallic and more recent language communities, this thesis will attempt to gesture toward cultural and social elements that might have existed in ancient Gaul.

The operative word is 'might,' as it is largely impossible to uncover the complexities and intricacies of a culture that not only existed two thousand years ago, but was also conquered by the dominant power in the Mediterranean. Rome at that time had an "appetite for dismembering other knowledge practices and systems,"[2] as Dan-el Padilla Peralta aptly puts it. Padilla Peralta's work, 'Epistemicide: The Roman Case,' is arguably the most formative piece of literature in terms of inspiring this thesis, as it was my first introduction to the lost knowledge systems of the Gauls who suffered from epistemological genocide at the hands of the Romans. As outlined by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, epistemicide--both a product and a means of colonizing--is defined as "the destruction of the knowledge and cultures of these [oppressed] populations, of their memories and ancestral links and their manner of relating to others and to nature."[3] Using this definition, Dan-el Padilla Peralta argues that the Roman Republic and Empire enacted large-scale epistemicide across the Mediterranean among multiple different vectors, engaging in the destruction or alteration of populations, ecologies, economies, linguistics, and religious and legal systems.

Roman epistemicide could be variously fulfilled, whether in the form of slaughtering or subjugating knowledge bearers, destroying sites that were sources of knowledge, or destabilizing

---

[2] Padilla Peralta, "Epistemicide," 156.
[3] de Sousa Santos, "The Epistemologies of the South and the Future of the University," 18.

social structure, as well as in other ways. Rome treated the epistemologies of the ‘barbarians’ much like they treated the barbarians themselves: some were destroyed and some were distorted into a form that would serve the state. At its core, this epistemicide was a facet and a function of maintaining Roman imperial and colonial power.

The question is then how do you find something that has been either lost or deliberately destroyed two thousand years later? Considering the sources, the evidence, and the context, the task of illuminating lost epistemologies is a difficult one. It is impossible to hear the subaltern speak, let alone make them do so. The goal is rather to probe the open spaces left by extant sources regarding those who were not victors so as to gesture towards what might have been. This is not a reversal of epistemicide, as that is presently impossible, but an illumination of potential Gallic linguistic practices and an acknowledgment of the Roman atrocities that altered them.

The first chapter of this thesis will be a general overview and background of Gallic history as it interacts with Rome, which provides a foundation for understanding the circumstances in question. The second chapter will first discuss the primary Greco-Roman ethnographic sources and define orality. It will then go on to examine these sources for evidence of Gallic oral practice found regarding both interpersonal and communal orality. This ancient evidence will be paired with comparanda from more recent oral cultures, when possible, to provide a more tangible, fleshed-out image of Gallic orality. The final chapter will discuss the various oral occupations attested in the ancient ethnographies and note their vital importance in the structuring and maintenance of Gallic society.

Chapter 1: Background

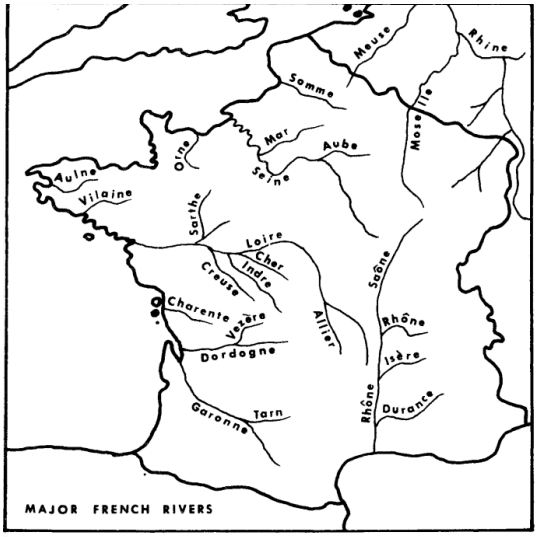
Definitions

If the layperson—or even the average ancient historian—knows anything about Gaul, it's the opening line of Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars*: "*Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres*." Whether translated as "All Gaul is divided into three parts" or "Gaul is a whole divided into three parts," the meaning is mostly the same and more relevant to how a Roman would divide Gaul than to how anyone actually living in that area would. Through the eyes of Caesar, Gaul was made up of three primary provinces: Aquitania to the southwest, Celtica in the center, and Belgia to the northeast. In truth, the Celts of Gaul don't fit into the neat boxes Greco-Roman authors often desire them to. Nonetheless, I will attempt to give general outlines of relevant terminology—aware of the potential irony—to mitigate confusion between writer and reader.[4]

Since the Gauls and Celts are often obscure or misunderstood, it is necessary to provide some definitions for the sake of clarity. Starting with the most encompassing terms and progressing to the smallest, 'Celt' or 'Celtic' is the broadest description. Rather than any kind of unifying national identity, 'Celtic' is more of a cultural complex than anything else.[5] In the Iron Age, various groups of people who spoke Celtic languages and partook in the La Tene style of

[4] Map of Gaul in 58 B.C. from Crumley, *Celtic Social Structure*, 12.
[5] Woolf, "Beyond Romans and Natives," 342.

objects migrated into Western Europe, including the areas of modern Spain, France, the British Isles, Germany, and northern Italy.[6]



The 'Gauls' are the Celtic peoples who lived in what is now modern France, bordered by the Bay of Biscay to the west, the British Channel to the north, the Garonne River to the south, and the Rhine and the Alps to the east. It is impossible to discern what the 'Gauls' called themselves, let alone what they called the land they lived on, so modern historians must rely on what Greco-Roman sources attest. That being said, even the ancient sources are varied in what they called these people—sometimes 'Celts,' sometimes 'Galatians,' sometimes 'Gauls.'[7] For the purposes of this paper, though, 'Celts' and 'Gaul(s)' will be used in the manner previously defined, and 'Galatians' will be used sparingly, if at all, only to describe the Celts who migrated to Asia Minor in the 3rd-century BCE.[8][9]

The Galatians, much like the other Celtic peoples outside of Gaul, are relatively unimportant to this story. While the 'Celtiberians' in Hispania and the inhabitants of Germania share some linguistic, cultural, and religious similarities to the Gauls in question, their histories and practices diverge significantly to the point where they can and must be delineated from the other continental Celtic groups. Celtic culture does not a Gaul make. What truly makes something Gallic— for the purposes of this paper—is what the Greco-Roman sources perceive a

[6] Crumley, *Celtic Social Structure*, v.
[7] See: Bridgman, "Keltoi, Galatai, Galli: Were They All One People?"
[8] Fernández-Götz, "Migrations in Iron Age Europe," 186.
[9] Map of major French rivers from Crumley, *Celtic Social Structure*, 40.

Gaul to be, since it is through their undeniably biased eyes that literature on the Gauls comes down from antiquity.

There were also places within the area inhabited by Gallic people that had greater contact with the Greco-Roman world and require noting for the sake of clarity. Marseille (ancient Massalia) on the Mediterranean coast of modern-day France, was colonized by the Greeks in the 6th century BCE and became a trading hub. The Gallic aristocracy in this area assimilated into classical culture for socio-economic gain, while the lower classes continued practicing indigenous Celtic culture.[10] The Romans later colonized this Greek-influenced area in the late 2nd century BCE, and it became part of Provincia Narbonensis, also known as Cisalpine Gaul.[11] As can be discerned by the etymology of their names, Cisalpine Gaul was on the side of the Alps closest to Rome, whereas Transalpine Gaul lay beyond the mountains. The area of Gaul focused upon most prominently in this paper is Transalpine Gaul, as this was the area colonized by Caesar and had stronger centers of Gallic culture.

General History

In the context of this thesis, I primarily utilize Greek and Roman ethnographic sources on Gaul by necessity, since they are the only accounts of Gallic culture outside of material evidence and oral speech leaves no discernable trace. The Gauls either did not write about themselves or what they did has since been lost to time. The only remaining option is these Greco-Roman authors, many of whom included long-held biases and stereotypes in their Gallic ethnographies. Nevertheless, beneath the scorn and condescension, there are glimpses of genuine oral practices

[10] Crumley, *Celtic Social Structure*, 71.
[11] *Ibid.*, 75.

in these accounts. To discern between prejudice and practice, however, it is first important to provide a basic understanding of Gallic social structure and their history of violent interactions with Rome.

Using literary evidence in conjunction with the archaeological record, anthropologist Carole Crumley argues that for the majority of the Celts' time in Gaul before Roman conquest, the area was comprised of various separate tribes of petty chiefdoms or kingships held together through the institutions of clientage and patriarchal family ties.[12] These tribes were individual units, with intertribal relationships of all kinds—hostile, tenuous, neutral, allied, etc.—and their most urbanized settlements would be fortified enclosures on hills or in marshes.[13] Within these settlements existed multiple classes and potential social mobility, which is in stark contrast to how Julius Caesar describes it. Caesar describes two privileged classes, the Druids and the knights, while stating that the other members of society occupied a position akin to slavery.[14] However, the archaeological record attests that there were

> at least three and perhaps four classes: the governing aristocracy, a middle class of merchants, civil employees, and guild members of the skilled trades, followed by agriculturalists, and finally a group of refugees and the destitute who may have worked as jobbers in agriculture and industry.[15]

Already the archaeological evidence complicates the preeminent primary source on Gaul, Caesar, which underscores the unreliability of the classical sources. In addition to the underlying political and ethnic biases of ancient authors, the period in which most of the eye-witness material on Gaul was collected (c. 115BCE and 80CE) occurred during a time of significant tumult in Gallic society.[16] The archaeological records attest that the social, economic, and political structures of

---

[12] *Ibid.*, 19, 23.
[13] *Ibid.*, 29.
[14] Caes., *B. G.,* 6.13.
[15] Crumley, *Celtic Social Structure*, 70.
[16] *Ibid.*, 4.

Gaul were undergoing considerable changes by the time Caesar came into the picture. This naturally complicates the ethnographies from antiquity, considering that the immortalized image of Gaul was captured not during typical times but in a period of considerable stress.

Within the decades before conquest, a notable number of the petty chiefdoms of Gaul were moving away from kingship and towards constitutional governance, attaining "many of the characteristics of statehood."[17] History has shown that the various tribes of Gaul could be inspired to unite towards a common goal, best exemplified by the coalition of Gallic tribes led by Vercingetorix to resist Roman colonization in the final parts of the Gallic Wars.[18] It is possible that the governments of Gaul would have progressed into constitutional nations without external pressures, but it is also possible the original forms would have naturally decayed as they "had proved inadequate to deal with the military advances of either Romans or Germans."[19] We will never know, as Roman colonization effectively stifled any form of independent growth these Celtic societies would have had. However, these internal negotiations and power and the general growing pains that come with governmental shifts are important to this story in two ways.

Firstly, as it so happened, this tumultuous period overlapped with when the primary ethnographic evidence was collected by Posidonius and other authors. As such, it was easy for these sources to lean into unfavorable stereotypes, portraying Gauls as violent, antagonistic, and chaotic. Secondly, this instability was utilized by Caesar to sow division among tribes. Amid institution-shaking internal changes, Rome was encroaching on Gallic territory through progressive mercantile, colonial, and military actions, which came to a head in the Gallic Wars. The evidence that was not gathered in the Posidonian era was primarily collected and published during these wars by Julius Caesar, and it was obviously not in his best interest to depict Gaul

[17] Crumley, *Celtic Social Structure*, 4, 23, 70.
[18] *Ibid.*, 23.
[19] Dyson, "Caesar and the Natives," 345.

favorably. He, like the other sources, fell back upon the long history of antagonism between Gaul and Rome.

The conflictal relationship between Rome and the Gauls did not begin with the Gallic Wars of 58-51 BCE. Both groups took their turns throughout the Iron Age reciprocally raiding (on the part of the Gauls) and colonizing (on the part of Greeks and Romans) each other. Throughout history, various Gallic groups had plundered Rome and Italian territory, sacking the city of Rome in the early 4th century BCE and committing numerous raids throughout Europe in the late 2nd century BCE.[20] This early sack of Rome left a lasting memory on the Roman consciousness, as "from infancy, Roman children heard stories of the Gallic sack of the city."[21] Since Greco-Roman authors would naturally describe other peoples with the characteristics that they witnessed most frequently and the only context most classical peoples encountered Gauls was during times of war and extreme stress, it was easy for Greek and Roman sources to depict Gauls as a familiar and terrifying bogeyman, all barbarous brawn and primitive customs.[22] These biases are important to remember, as the entirety of extant literary sources on Gallic peoples are written by authors whose conceptions of Gauls were often unfavorable at best and downright monstrous at worst.

Evoking the familiar Gallic boogeyman and the collective trauma of the 4th-century sacking of Rome, Julius Caesar made the argument to Roman elites that the subjugation of Gaul was necessary to avoid future invasions.[23] As governor of Narbonensis, Caesar had some alliances with Gallic tribes, some of whom near the Rhine likely asked Rome for assistance in warding off invading Germanic tribes.[24] With this request, Caesar saw an excuse to occupy

---

[20] Wells, *The Barbarians Speak*, 311.
[21] Dyson, "Caesar and the Natives," 342.
[22] Wells, *The Barbarians Speak*, 243.
[23] *Ibid.*, 247.
[24] Crumley, *Celtic Social Structure*, 76.

Transalpine Gaul in the pursuit of glory that rivaled Pompey's and enacted a divide-and-conquer technique to weaponize the individual nature of Gallic tribes.[25] Eventually, even the tribes that had been allied with Rome realized that colonization meant being like Narbonensis: "stripped of rights and laws, subjected to Roman despotism, [and] oppressed by perpetual slavery."[26] In the face of this *servitute perpetua*, the diverse tribes of Gaul united under Vercingetorix to oppose Roman colonization.[27] Despite this moving display of solidarity in the face of oppression, the coalition of Gaul eventually lost to Rome, coming under the yolk of Roman provincial administration.

The devastation wrought by Caesar's Gallic campaign cannot be fully comprehended, both in terms of accurate numbers and sheer destruction. Some scholars postulate, on the higher end, that the number of Gallic casualties in the war totaled between 16 and 25% of the total population, meaning that, at best, one out of every seven Gauls died.[28] On perhaps the more moderate end of the spectrum, it is probable that hundreds of thousands of Gauls were killed in battle, with more enslaved and killed through indirect means. The carnage inflicted upon the Gauls was extensive, as

> large parts starved to death because the harvests were confiscated or destroyed and their settlements and farmsteads burned, or they froze to death when the legions drove them out of their settlements in winter and burned down buildings, villages, and towns. Huge forests were systematically felled…herds of cattle and pigs were driven from the fields and devoured.[29]

As a Gaul, even if you were not killed by Romans in a battle or siege, there is a very probable chance that you would either be enslaved, starved to death, or killed by the hypothermic

---

[25] Woolf, *Becoming Roman*, 29.
[26] *Quae in provinciam redacta iure et legibus commutatis securibus subiecta perpetua premitur servitute*, Caes. *B.G.*, 7.78.
[27] Dyson, "Caesar and the Natives," 345.
[28] Raaflaub, "Caesar and Genocide," 56.
[29] *Ibid.*, 56.

European winters. The connection between the decimation of Gaul's population and Gallic culture cannot be overstated, especially considering that their cultural knowledge was held only within individuals rather than texts. For the people of Gaul, this conquest must have been incomprehensibly devastating; for Caesar, this conquest was merely another feather in his cap. While the subjugation of Gaul and other territories was a significant political and military accomplishment for Caesar, he could not revel in his notoriety for long.

Within a decade of conquering Gaul, Julius Caesar was assassinated and his adoptive son, Octavian, took control of the empire for the following five decades. As such, the first emperor had much more time and energy to focus on the pacification of Gaul through various political, social, and military means. During his time as emperor, Augustus continued the policy of settling veterans in Gaul and strengthened Roman military bases in Gallic territory.[30] This reinforcement of military might was necessary for the empire to retain control of the colonized lands, as Gallic resistance forces continued to fight "well into Augustus' reign."[31]

In terms of administrative policies, the imperial government took steps to delineate and redefine the borders and settlements of Gaul to both destabilize Gallic organization and appropriate indigenous land. The most surface-level alteration was Augustus' move to increase the size of Aquitania to "make the three provinces roughly equivalent for administrative purposes."[32] In making Gaul easier for provincial governments to manage, Rome worked to more effectively subject the people of Gaul to imperial legislative and bureaucratic control. The tribes that had previously been self-governed with relatively fluid borders were forced into a Roman mold, "structured by territorial provinces, each comprising a number of communities, the

[30] Wells, *The Barbarians Speak*, 311.
[31] Woolf, *Becoming Roman*, 31.
[32] Crumley, *Celtic Social Structure*, 14.

statuses, rights and obligations of which were legally defined."[33] In addition to the almost micro-managing of formerly sovereign peoples, Rome enacted a policy of confiscating land in Gaul, redistributing it to colonists, and forcing the Gauls into worse areas.[34] Hill sites, which were the central location for Gallic towns, were forcibly abandoned as the Augustan administration made the indigenous population relocate to valleys and lowlands.[35] Acquiring prime Gallic land was beneficial to the empire for a multitude of reasons: Gauls were forced off their land and thus destabilized, that land was given to veterans who could protect Roman interests in the area as a military force, and the Gauls no longer held possession of the high ground, giving the ideal strategic position to imperial forces if the Gauls chose to launch a military assault.

Beyond being merely subjugation in the administrative sense, these forced displacements demonstrated a disruption of indigenous Gallic epistemologies. Knowledge in oral cultures is often intertwined with the concrete, as locations, environments, and entities in the natural world are used to aid in memory recall. In short, the ability to access certain information was reliant on access to certain locations. While the exact information encoded in the environment of Gaul is both beyond the scope of this thesis and largely lost to time, the imperial reorganization of the area almost certainly was a facet of Roman epistemicide, intentional or not.

In addition to bureaucratic control measures, Rome took steps to put social structures and community norms under the purview of the colonizing government. As a facet of domination, the Roman government would favor Rome-aligned aristocracy and emphasize elements that would more fully assimilate Gauls to exist under Roman control. At the end of the first century CE, Tacitus wrote in *Agricola* about the Roman policy in Gaul to teach the sons of aristocrats a

[33] Woolf, *Becoming Roman*, 35.
[34] *Ibid.*, 38.
[35] Crumley, *Celtic Social Structure*, 35.

'liberal education' *(liberalibus artibus erudire*) and have Roman practices be a signifier of distinction. He states that the "natives gave the name of 'culture' to this factor of their slavery," making an astute observation of imperial policy.[36] As Tacitus points out, the adoption and glorification of Roman forms served to place the Gallic aristocracy under the yoke of the empire.

On the other hand, Gauls who adhered to traditional practices were discriminated against by Romans. Augustus, as well as later Roman government officials, took specific legislative steps to curb Druidic practices and traditional Celtic religion. Throughout Roman history,

> Augustus (27 B.C.-A.D. 14) forbade the Druidic religion for Roman citizens; under Tiberius (A.D. 14-27) a decree of the Senate was issued against Druids and related diviners (vates) and healers (medici), and Claudius abolished the 'cruel and inhuman religion of the Druids in Gaul.[37]

The reasons for these prohibitions are varied, though the legislative steps to suppress Druids were at least in part intended to suppress sites of colonized resistance. There were numerous rebellions against the Roman colonizing power in Gaul in the decades, and even centuries, after conquest. These rebellions were often led by Gauls in positions of power in the Roman provincial administration, and their motivations for doing so are beyond the scope of this paper, but the act of rebelling in itself implies the underlying discontent and agitation of the general Gallic populace.[38] In the mid-first century CE, Tacitus notes "Druidic involvement in Gallic revolts,"[39] which all but confirms the connection between the carriers of indigenous religious practices and pockets of resistance. Regardless of whether Druids were leading the charge in rebellions or simply stoking the flames, it is clear that there is some connection between resistance and Druidic practice.

---

[36] Tacitus et al., *Agricola*, 21.1.
[37] Webster, "At the End of the World," 11.
[38] Woolf, *Becoming Roman*, 21.
[39] Webster, "At the End of the World," 13.

The targeting of Druids, while motivated by their seeming political significance and social sway, was a significant contributor to the Roman epistemicide of Gallic knowledge. As I will expand upon further in Chapter 3, the Druids were the cultural and academic bastions of Gaul. They spent decades learning to recall the vast corpus of Gallic cultural, religious, medical, historical, and legal knowledge, continuing the oral tradition necessary to maintain society. As a matter of cultural significance, this information was not textualized. When the Druids were outlawed or worse, killed, the cultural knowledge died with them.

Regardless of whether the epistemicide was intentional or not, the deliberate destabilization and reorganization of Gaul were. Rome deliberately dissuaded Gallic practices that could have threatened Roman hegemony and promoted those that would more easily assimilate them into the Roman order, such as literacy. However, despite these efforts, remnants of Gallic epistemologies still remain, albeit hidden in ethnographies written by foreigners. When one knows what to look for, the hidden gems of Gallic orality become clear in these ancient accounts and some genuine practices can be uncovered. From there, it becomes obvious how vital orality was to Celtic culture, and how much was lost upon conquest.

Chapter 2: Orality Among Community

While the evidence for Gallic orality is scant and often biased, the importance of oral arts in Gallic society nevertheless shines through in the Greco-Roman literary accounts. Considering that oral communication leaves no direct material or literary mark, these somewhat biased sources provide the most ample evidence for this now-extinct oral tradition. If one knows what to look for, it becomes clear that within these ethnographic works, there exists an account of a rich and sophisticated oral community in Gaul.

In this chapter, I will start with the personal and expand to the institutional, outlining the oral techniques and traditions that permeated all levels of Gallic society. I argue that in describing the way Gauls speak to others, Greco-Roman authors observed rhetorical techniques and speech habits frequently found in oral cultures. The sources note that Gauls have a habit of ritually arguing with and insulting one another, a practice that appears petty and violent to outsiders, but in actuality is a common trait of the oral tradition. On a larger scale, the evidence shows that Gauls often employ oral strategies to skillfully communicate within and between communities—including long-distance communication—without the aid of writing. In sum, I argue that when we know what to look for in these outsider accounts, we can recover the traces of Gallic oral epistemologies as well as find evidence that suggests orality wholly permeated Gallic society.

The Sources

Before examining the ethnographies, it is important to note the positionality of each source in relation to Gaul—temporally, spatially, ideologically—such that potential biases are

acknowledged and mitigated, if possible. There are three primary ancient writers on Gaul who gesture towards oral-centered linguistic practices, all of whom share inherent similarities through their mutual source material. The Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, fellow Greek geographer Strabo, and infamous Roman statesman Julius Caesar each use Posidonius of Apamea as a prominent, if not their only, source on Gaul. Athenaeus of Naucratis also provides evidence for Gallic orality, not through his own prose but through direct quotation of Posidonius.

Posidonius (c. 135-51 BCE) was a Greek Stoic philosopher and polymath who was both well-traveled and well-read. Given that he believed that the character and qualities of various peoples were the drivers of history, his 52-book collection on the history of the Mediterranean from 146 to c. 85 BCE covered not only historical events but also geography and ethnology.[40] Book 23 of this History is said to have described the Celts but is now lost to time, surviving only in miscellaneous quotes and adaptations by later authors. Since the extant ancient works on Gaul utilized his work, their accounts are the closest we can get to having literary evidence of pre-conquest Gaul.[41]

That is not to say that Posidonius as a source is without flaws. Jane Webster argues that Posidonius is only known to have visited Massilia/Mersaille in southern Gaul, which as stated before in the brief history of Gaul, was colonized by the Greeks in the 6th century.[42] While this is important to keep in mind, this does not inherently render Posidonius' account inaccurate. Those living in southern Gaul were still undeniably Celtic, though with newer Greek influences. Foreign additions to a culture with Celtic origins, especially with its inhabitants still speaking a Celtic language, do not automatically erase the elements of Gallic orality. Given that Posidonius was well acquainted with Greek culture as a long-time teacher in Rhodes and extensive traveler,

[40] Ian Gray Kidd, "Posidonius" (Oxford University Press, 2012).
[41] Freeman, *War, Women, and Druids*, 11; Tierney, "The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius," 198.
[42] Webster, "At the End of the World," 8.

one might assume that as an intelligent ethnographer and historian, he would notice elements unrecognized as 'Greek' and compare them with traits commonly ascribed to 'Celts.'

Attempts to distinguish between Greekness and Gallic-ness bring us to another problem: the issue of Posidonius' perspective. The Greco-Roman view of foreigners, especially Celts and Gauls, tends to be extremely unfavorable. Because most authors were only familiar with Celts in a military context, they are portrayed as violent, strong, stupidly brave, and excitable. As such, their works "[reflect] the indigenous groups in circumstances of extreme stress" rather than the humdrum of the day-to-day.[43] On the other hand, this condescending attitude towards the Gauls can present itself in an oddly nostalgic view. Some sources, Posidonius among them, saw the Gauls as a culture existing in a sort of "simplicity and virtue [that] recall[s] the psychology of the Homeric or even the Golden Age."[44] So, while people of Celtic culture were scorned by Greeks and Romans, to some they represented an odd paragon of an archaic naiveté beyond the decadence of the Hellenistic world. These complications are important to note, given that these imperfect sources are the only ones we have. The only way to truly examine these accounts is to approach them with skepticism and the knowledge that some listed Gallic characteristics may be influenced by long-held biases.

As fellow Hellenes, Diodorus and Strabo may have held similar biases and perspectives as Posidonius, though they each carry their own unique lived and academic experiences. As such, a brief biography is useful in understanding who each of the sources were.

Given that Diodorus' account of the Gauls is the most extensive and closest we can get to a first-hand account *not* from Gaul's main colonizer, we will begin with him. Diodorus Siculus was a Greek historian from Sicily in the first century B.C.E who attempted to write a universal

---

[43] Wells, *The Barbarians Speak*, 244.
[44] Tierney, "The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius," 212.

history titled *Bibliothēkē* (or "Library"), also known as *The Library of History.* The *Library* was comprised of 40 books—15 of which are completely extant—that cover Mediterranean history from the Trojan War up to 60 B.C.E.[45] Most of the text is based upon the writings of previous sources, now lost to time, with the addition of Diodorus' personal moralizing views.[46] The work is of note on account of being the "only [extant] large-scale history written in the late Republic" as well as the longest surviving history from an ancient Greek author.[47] Most of his research was done while living in Rome in the middle of the century, and there is no evidence he lived or traveled anywhere outside of Sicily, Italy, and Egypt in his lifetime.[48] Despite this, his *Library* has one of the largest ancient descriptions of Gallic linguistic practices, which is heavily influenced by the writings of Posidonius who *had* traveled around Gaul in the same century.

The next notable author working within the Posidonian tradition was Strabo of Amaseia (c. 64 BCE - 21 CE) who wrote *Geography*. Strabo came from a prominent family in Pontus, was educated by some of the most preeminent scholars, and personally knew Posidonius. Throughout his life, he received patronage from powerful Romans around the Mediterranean and traveled extensively throughout.[49] While staying in Egypt, he worked on his *Geography*, an extensive work "designed not for mathematicians but for statesmen who must know countries, natural resources, and customs."[50] In his description of Gaul, Strabo largely relied on Posidonius for his information, and so the Gallic account within should be seen as a relic of pre-conquest Gaul rather than being up-to-date for the Augustan Age.

---

[45] Kenneth S. Sacks, *Diodorus Siculus and the First Century* (Princeton University Press, 1990), 3.
[46] *Ibid.*,, 3, 6.
[47] *Ibid.*, 5; Kenneth S. Sacks, "Diodorus (3) of Agyrium, Sicily" (Oxford University Press, 2012).
[48] Sacks, *Diodorus Siculus and the First Century*, 6.
[49] Nicholas Purcell, "Strabo" (Oxford University Press, 2012).
[50] Lasserre, François, "Strabo," Britannica Academic, accessed 21 April 2024, academic-eb-com.libproxy.vassar.edu/levels/collegiate/article/Strabo/69864.

The author most closely associated with the direct writings of Posidonius was Athenaeus of Naucratis. In contrast with the other mentioned authors who utilize Posidonius, Athenaeus was not attempting to compile any kind of ethnography, Gallic or otherwise. The only work of Athenaeus that comes down from antiquity is *Δειπνοσοφισταί* ('The Learned Banquet'), which was completed c. 192 CE. The *Banquet* is in symposium form, in which various banqueters discuss an array of intellectual subjects across disciplines. Through the context of this fictional dinner party, "Athenaeus has collected much independently from the great writers; he cites some 1,250 authors, gives the titles of more than 1,000 plays, and quotes more than 10,000 lines of verse."[51] As it so happens, one of the included quotes is from Posidonius and relates to the roles of some oral experts in Gallic society. As a result, the only explicitly direct quotation of Posidonius' ethnography of Gaul is found within a few brief lines in Athenaeus' second-century work.

Julius Caesar, while influenced by the writings of Posidonius, belongs to a different class of sources entirely on account of his personal entanglement with Gaul. As outlined in the previous chapter, the political life of Caesar was considerably intertwined with the people of Gaul. In 58 BCE as governor of Transalpine Gaul, he began waging war in the province, engaging in a physical struggle against the indigenous Gauls in the field and a war of popularity with his opposition in Rome. In order to boast about his achievements and obscure his losses, Caesar penned several books to send back to Rome about the war entitled *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* (Commentaries on the Gallic War), though also referred to as just *The Gallic Wars*. In these commentaries, Caesar provides details on the affairs of war: problems, solutions, alliances, betrayals, battles, sieges, losses, war crimes, etc. At the core of the commentaries, Caesar reveals

[51] Walter Manoel Edwards, Robert Browning, and Nigel Guy Wilson, "Athenaeus" (Oxford University Press, 2012).

a care only for what will further his own political interests and this perspective permeates every book.[52]

Late in his conquest of Gaul, in Book VI out of VII, Caesar finds it useful to give a brief Gallic ethnography based on the account of Posidonius. Again, his emphasis is on what would have been politically beneficial, which means that he highlights certain aspects of the political structure and familiar stereotypes of Gallic character. By playing into the anti-Gallic biases of the Roman people, portraying them as unnecessarily combative, inadvisedly loud-mouthed, and functionally enslaved (a dubious claim), he was able to garner support for his excursion in Gaul. The fact that Caesar was Gaul's main conqueror and colonizer inherently complicates the validity of his account, especially considering that his writings were fueled by his pursuit of power rather than creating a true ethnography. Even so, in his descriptions of Gallic communication networks, Caesar's discontent betrays an element of anxiety about the fact that the Gauls he was fighting against were skilled at obtaining, receiving, and transmitting information both among themselves and outsiders. As such, Caesar's writings on the Gauls can be utilized as a fruitful account of orality if one reads them with a discerning eye and critical acceptance while being wary of the inherent biases.

Introduction to Orality

I have mentioned that these ancient sources show remnants of Gallic orality, though I have not yet defined the term. Considering that 'orality' is far less understood by the majority than its relative 'literacy,' it is probably necessary to do so now. Orality, just like literacy, is first and foremost a tool and a skill, though its use has been far more widespread than writing

[52] Tierney, "The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius," 213, 222.

throughout the entirety of human history. Something that is 'oral' is, by definition, related to the mouth; in this case, the transmission of information through word-of-mouth. Orality is a mechanism of encoding, transmitting, and retaining information through oral forms rather than written ones. As such an 'oral' society is one that often utilizes oral means to conserve the knowledge "reflected upon and integrated within a culture."[53]

It can not be overstated that orality should not be seen as mere illiteracy, nor should the connotations of the label be applied to orality. Orality is not a failing of knowledge or intelligence, but a different way of sharing information than textualizing it. All cultures contain oral elements to varying degrees, though often the skills associated with orality become less honed in cultures that utilize writing. There is no substantial difference in mental or social capacity between largely oral or textual societies, only a different method in which knowledge is stored and conveyed. Often in primarily oral cultures—cultures that give a high place in society to the spoken word—cultural knowledge is retained and transmitted through oral traditions.

Oral traditions can be a stunningly accurate means of retaining and transmitting knowledge through many generations while simultaneously allowing a fair amount of flexibility to strategically emphasize or omit information best suited for the needs of the moment.[54] The specifics of oral tradition—both in terms of content and means of transmission—vary between and among cultures, though they often utilize similar genres and memory aids. Oral forms include, though are not limited to, poetry, song, epics, chants, reading written or orally composed works aloud, and storytelling, all as a means of transmitting and retaining information as well as bolstering social cohesion. To maximize the recall of knowledge encoded in these forms, the knowledge masters of each culture use a variety of mnemonic devices—some familiar to us as

---

[53] Kelly, *Knowledge and Power in Prehistoric Societies*, 41.
[54] Scott, "Orality, Writing, and Texts," 230.

readers, some less so. While the forms of these mnemonic devices vary, among the experts who study, retain, and teach oral tradition, the "development of some form of secondary medium is universal but the implementation is culturally specific."[55] In her introduction to *Knowledge and Power in Prehistoric Societies*, memory scholar Lynne Kelly explains the concept quite nicely:

> In order to memorise and recall vast tracts of narrative, oral cultures developed many standard 'tricks of the trade'—oral technologies to aid them, such as formulaic and stereotypical expression, standard themes, adding characterising epithets to names, repetition, redundancy, praise and blame formats, and in particular rhyme and dance. Vivid characters in stories form a mythological corpus. Narratives encode the knowledge base of the culture.[56]

Narratives and stories contain the necessary information, these memory experts both recall and interpret that information, and in order to recall this body of knowledge, they utilize oral devices—alliteration, rhyme, superlatives, etc. These common characteristics are important to note since traces of orality are difficult to find if one does not know what to look for, especially so in a culture that no longer exists. However, in addition to the genres and traits that Kelly outlines, there are further commonalities in tone among oral cultures which we can find evidence of when we are trained to recognize their defining characteristics.

Walter Ong, a priest and scholar credited with founding the study of orality, outlines several common characteristics of speech in primarily oral cultures, the most important of which is being 'antagonistically toned.' Considering that orally contained knowledge inherently involves at least two parties—one to recite and one to receive; one to teach and one to learn—there is always some element of give-and-take, which Ong describes as almost violent.[57] He outlines this point and provides some examples of his claim:

> [O]rality situates knowledge within a context of struggle. Proverbs and riddles are not used simply to store knowledge but to engage others in verbal and intellectual combat:

---

[55] Kelly, *Knowledge and Power in Prehistoric Societies*, 63.
[56] *Ibid.*, xv.
[57] Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 44.

> utterance of one proverb or riddle challenges hearers to top it with a more apposite or a contradictory one. Bragging about one's own prowess and/or verbal tongue-lashings of an opponent figure regularly lie in encounters between characters in narrative.[58]

This description is particularly significant, considering that many of these traits—proverbs, riddles, verbal parries—are evident in the Gallic ethnography. To outsiders, or those unfamiliar with oral customs, these characteristics seem oblique, conflictual, and unnecessarily difficult. However, with the understanding that antagonism (friendly, playful, hostile, or anything in between) is common in discourse among oral cultures, the bombast and aggression of Gallic communication can be understood in its proper context and removed from the ignorant biases of Greco-Roman accounts.

In sum, while not all oral cultures have the same characteristics, there are often similarities in terms of the content and methods of encoding knowledge. All cultures have their idiosyncrasies, but the capacity of the human brain is more or less the same regardless of era or location.[59] Considering that Gallic culture has since been lost to time and the primary records of its customs are from biased or hostile sources, I will provide a variety of comparanda of known orality-focused societies to illuminate the Celtic oral remnants left in these sources. Oral practices and cultures can be found across space and time, from verbal fighting in the *Iliad*, a work entrenched in the Greek oral arts, to the Black oral tradition in the United States, which has its roots in West African orality. Through analyzing well-attested oral communities alongside one that there are only fragments of, I argue that it becomes possible to gesture towards, if not uncover, actual Gallic language practices.

---

[58] Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 43.
[59] Kelly, *Knowledge and Power in Prehistoric Societies*, xv.

One-on-One, Interpersonal Communication

The knowledge encoded within the struggle of orality is not limited to just institutionalized or academic subjects. The antagonistic, push-and-pull nature of discourse in primarily oral cultures can be seen at the individual level of conversation. In Book V of the *Library*, Diodorus identifies various traits of Gallic interpersonal communication that are characteristic of discursive practices in oral societies. Diodorus relays a relatively intact summary of Posidonius' Gallic characterizations, though he is in general prone to a rather "ruthless abbreviation."[60] Paragraph 31 is of particular interest given that it outlines potential pre-conquest language practices and knowledge technologies:

> The Gauls are terrifying in aspect and their voices are deep and altogether harsh; when they meet together they *converse with few words and in riddles, hinting darkly* at things for the most part and *using one word when they mean another*; and they like to *talk in superlatives*, to the end that they may extol themselves and depreciate all other men. They are also *boasters and threateners* and are *fond of pompous language*, and yet they have sharp wits and are not without cleverness at learning.[61]

This is an incredible attestation to Gallic conversational practices, as it attempts to display an array of oral-focused speech through available Greek vocabulary. Posidonius, through Diodorus, identifies that Gauls were observed to speak in few words (βραχυλόγοι) and riddles (αἰνιγματίαι), utilizing synecdoche (συνεκδοχικῶς·) as well as hyperbole (ἐν ὑπερβολαῖς) and bombastic tragic style (τετραγῳδημένοι).[62] The former three spoken rhetorical devices listed here display a certain playful reticence, while the latter two embody an exaggerated bombast. Both modes of speech decidedly confused the non-Gallic observer. Whoever was present with the Gauls in question—be it Posidonius or his source—witnessed people engaging in conversational practices that appeared to skirt around the speaker's true meaning.

---

[60] Tierney, "The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius," 204.
[61] Diodorus Siculus and Oldfather, "The Library of History," 5.31, emphasis added.
[62] Diodorus 5.31, trans. Rachel Friedman, email message to author, March 16, 2024.

There are multiple possibilities for the context in which these forms were heard, but most, if not all of them, are deeply intertwined with the source's etic perspective. It is not unreasonable to assume that Posidonius or Diodorus did *not* speak fluent Gaulish, in addition to their positionality as outsiders. As such, there is likely much nuance lost regarding both the circumstances of the utterances and what their social function and meaning would have been perceived as by the emic perspective. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the speaker(s) were toying with the outside observer(s), speaking in a deliberately confusing manner and reaffirming the ethnographer's foreignness. That is not to say that the observation of riddles, synecdoche, hyperbole, and bombast are entirely dismissable; the best and most measured approach both examines the evidence and keeps in mind potential flaws.

Greco-Roman depictions of Gauls as particularly barbarous, quick-witted, and confrontational are hardly anything new, but it is plausible that this description was inspired less by prejudices than by actual observed practices. The way that Diodorus describes the evasiveness in Gallic speech clearly falls into the familiar antagonism of orality as described by Ong.[63] To the observer familiar with the discursive practices of Gaul, the conflictual nature of conversational speech would have been better understood in its proper context. Sometimes this oral aggression was benign and sometimes was backed by genuine malice, however, this distinction would likely have been lost on outside ethnographers. Regardless of emotional context, the prominent antagonism of Gallic discourse is, to the knowledgeable eye, situated firmly within oral cultural practice, even if misunderstood by the extant sources.

In addition to the general antagonism of Gallic speech, this quote from Diodorus gestures towards another common element in oral cultures, as outlined by both Kelly and Ong: praise and blame formats. The latter half of the Diodorus excerpt notes that Gauls use superlatives and

[63] Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 36-47.

exaggerated braggadocio to boast about themselves, while simultaneously using the same extreme speech to insult and threaten others.[64] While the bombast and braggadocio could just be an example of the audacity and confrontational nature of the Gauls, practices of a similar type are well-attested in other oral cultures. Praise and blame are two sides of the same coin, each emphasizing and expounding the qualities of the subject; the only difference is that one highlights the positive, while the latter focuses on the negative. Additionally, the exaggeration of traits within praise or blame falls within the realm of orality, considering that extreme traits tend to aid in memory recall. Ong states that "oral memory works effectively with 'heavy' characters, persons whose deeds are monumental, memorable and commonly public… Colorless personalities cannot survive oral mnemonics."[65] It follows that if someone wishes to cement themselves in the memory of others and potentially that of the culture, they would need to emphasize their most notable traits in the manner of braggadocio.

Given that orality can produce similar forms across cultures, speech practices similar to what is depicted in Diodorus can find an analogous example in the oral practices of Black Americans, especially in the context of rapping. The traits that Geneva Smitherman identifies within Black rap in *Talkin and Testifyin* bear some similarities to those seen in Diodorus. She notes "exaggerated language (unusual words, High Talk); mimicry; proverbial statement and aphoristic phrasing; punning and plays on words; spontaneity and improvisation; image-making and metaphor; braggadocio; indirection (circumlocution, suggestiveness); and tonal semantics."[66] Referring back to Diodorus 5.31, the Gauls may have utilized something similar to the exaggerated language, plays on words, and indirection present in rap, as seen in Gallic riddles, hyperbole, suggestiveness, and verbal sleight-of-hand. Indirection is utilized in rap such that, "it

[64] Diodorus Siculus and Oldfather, "The Library of History," 5.31.
[65] Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 68.
[66] Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin*, 94.

is left to the listener to decipher and explicate the totality of meaning,"[67] which is a sentiment Posidonius' first-hand observer of Gauls might agree with. Beyond this, the dramatic self-promotion of oneself and deprecation of the other is similar to a rapper's braggadocio, boasting about the "physical badness, fighting ability, lovemanship, [and] coolness" of the speaker.[68] Rapping intellectually and socially engages the listener, challenging them to understand the meaning of utterances while reflecting upon the performer's skill and prowess.

When similar tools of speech are used toward ritualized confrontation with two or more individuals engaging in "verbal contesting with an ad hominem orientation," this is most similar to the practice of flyting.[69] The term 'flyting' comes from the medieval Scottish verbal competition between poets of the same name. It frequently involves self-aggrandizement, belittling the opponent, and boasting about genealogy out of the desire to "assert and prove selfhood" between individuals of the same community or otherwise.[70] This aggressive but verbal back-and-forth of slinging insults and boasting about oneself is a ritualized competition of wit with specific, though largely unspoken, rules and norms.

A relatively modern example of flyting is found in the game of 'dozens,' a playful yet complex verbal genre that has in recent times been oversimplified to purely 'yo mama' jokes.[71] In this game, two young peers, usually boys, begin to insult each other's mothers, riffing off one another while other youths stand by, participating by showing their approval, or lack thereof, toward each consecutive diss. This practice has been recorded in urban areas across the United States for the past century and has its roots in West African oral practices. Dayter states that the practice of dozens "could generally have developed only in an oral society, where verbal skill is

---

[67] Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin*, 97.
[68] *Ibid.*, 97.
[69] Parks, *Verbal Dueling in Heroic Narrative*, 164.
[70] *Ibid.*, 166.
[71] For a more comprehensive examination of 'dirty dozens,' see Dayter 2017.

appreciated as performative art," rather than taking each diss as a genuine insult to themselves and their mothers.[72] For researchers outside of this language community, it is difficult to understand this nuance and its light-heartedness, especially since not all flyting is good-humored.

Occasionally, as in epic literature such as the *Iliad*, flyting has martial consequences and is the precursor for physical—and potentially deadly—fighting, rather than simply verbal combat. One such example can be found in the ancient world when in *Iliad* Book 20, Achilles and Aieneias hurl boasts and insults at one another about worthiness and divine lineage before they continue to spar with weapons rather than words.[73] This event has particular significance because the Homeric epics were formulated in a time of oral storytelling and culture until they were eventually textualized. The original medium for the *Iliad,* and works like it, was formulaic poetic recitations.

In continuing his description of Gallic oral antagonism, Diodorus writes

> It is their custom, even during the course of the meal, to seize upon any trivial matter as an occasion for keen disputation and then to challenge one another to single combat, without any regard for their lives.[74]

The depiction of Gauls as short-tempered, argumentative, and violent is not out of line with Greco-Roman biases, but as evidenced by the existence of Homeric flyting, a verbal fight turning into a physical one is not uncommon in oral cultures. Granted, this account should still be taken with a grain of salt, especially considering the final addition of "without any regard for their lives." Greco-Roman authors thought Gauls to be similar to Pythagoreans in that they believed in the continued existence of souls after death. The almost foolish bravery of Gauls in battle is well-attested in extant sources, so there is a fair chance that this passage was written to bolster the caricature of the hot-headed Celt who had wonton disregard for his own mortality. That being

---

[72] Dayter, "Orality and Literacy in Verbal Duelling," 39-40.
[73] Parks, *Verbal Dueling in Heroic Narrative*, 172.
[74] Diodorus Siculus and Oldfather, "The Library of History," 5.28.5-6.

said, considering that verbal (and then physical) dueling is attested in various orality-focused cultures, this might be a true description of Gallic oral practices couched in subtle philosophical musings.

However, the fact that Diodorus outlines another, similar verbal-martial discourse practice in the following paragraph which does *not* have to do with the transmigration of souls gives further credence to this possibility. It should be noted, however, that in this instance, compared to the previous one, the trash talk is not the cause of combat but a feature. The Greek author notes that

> It is also their custom, when they are formed for battle, to step out in front of the line and to challenge the most valiant men from among their opponents to single combat, brandishing their weapons in front of them to terrify their adversaries. And when any man accepts the challenge to battle, they then break forth into *a song in praise of the valiant deeds of their ancestors and in boast of their own high achievements, reviling* all the while and *belittling their opponent*, and trying, in a word, by such talk to strip him of his bold spirit before the combat.[75]

This is a scare tactic to damage the enemy's spirit before the battle even begins, but it is strikingly similar to the practice of flyting, as well as to the trash talk and self-aggrandizement of certain raps. In each, there is the personal braggadocio to bolster oneself, the demeaning of the opponent, and the potential violence to back up those big words. This practice, which Diodorus deems interesting and unfamiliar enough to note, is commonly found in oral cultures. The elements of antagonism should be familiar by now as characteristic of oral practice, but it also introduces the common theme of lineage.

This excerpt indicates that the 'valiant deeds of their ancestors' are deeply intertwined with 'their own high achievements'—a sentiment that is common in oral practice. For the individual, one's ancestors often are a source of pride and distinguishment if they were notable in the community. Individuals with a well-respected lineage might tend to marry someone of

[75] Diodorus Siculus and Oldfather, "The Library of History," 5.29.2-3, emphasis added.

similar social standing, ensuring the high position of their offspring in society. Knowledge of families is a significant determiner of hereditary social standing and property rights (if those exist in the given society). Additionally, in terms of proper marriage matches, it is important to delineate who is related to whom in order to avoid incest and other unwanted reproductive impacts. As such, keeping track of family lines is a significant part of memorization in oral cultures, both for the sake of sexual reproduction and reinforcing social hierarchy. As Kelly notes, "given the value of genealogies to oral cultures, it is not surprising to find them formally chanted in oral cultures across the world."[76] That is not to say that lineage is not important in literate cultures, but when the family tree can be and is regularly written down, individuals in society spend less time and care committing the information to memory.

The importance of reciting ancestral deeds in oral cultures can often still be seen today in the oral-oriented practice of rap. Take, for example, *DNA.* on Kendrick Lamar's Pulitzer Prize-winning album *DAMN*. In the music video for this track, Lamar and actor Don Cheadle trade bars, verbally fighting in a way reminiscent of flyting. The opening lines of the song begin, "I got loyalty, got royalty inside my DNA," and Lamar continues the rest of the rap boasting about his genetics and insulting his opponent's. He raps

> "[your] Daddy prolly snitched, heritage inside your DNA
> Backbone don't exist, born outside a jellyfish, I gauge
> See, my pedigree most definitely don't tolerate the front
> Shit I've been through prolly offend you, this is Paula's oldest son."[77]

Within these few lines, we can see both the aspects of praise and blame so frequently present in oral cultures. Whoever Lamar is speaking to, he states that their father was probably a snitch—someone seen as a spineless betrayer of his community—and this trait was passed down

---

[76] Kelly, *Knowledge and Power in Prehistoric Societies*, 127.
[77] Kendrick Lamar, "DNA," produced by Mike WiLL Made-It, Warner Music Group, track 2 on *DAMN.*, 2017.

to his jellyfish-like opponent. Moving on from blame, Lamar begins with praise. He notes the significance of his pedigree, or lineage, as his mother Paula's eldest son, as well as bolstering his own abilities and deeds. Considering how blatant the similarities are, it is easy to imagine pre-battle braggadocio spoken by a Gaul rather than Achilles or Kendrick Lamar.

For individuals within the community, the exchange of antagonistic verses can serve various social purposes. At their simplest, these verbal battles serve to reaffirm the pecking order and social hierarchy in terms of both prestige and skill. It solidifies the position of the more skilled orator as the crowd, as was and is common in rap battles, determines the winner through audience participation. This participation in itself serves to solidify the community itself since the mutual engagement and entertainment of the crowd creates a sense of the collective 'we.' The relationships between the flyters and each other, the flyters and the crowd, and those in the crowd are thus solidified through this collective experience and judgment.

Oral communication continues to be important in Gallic practice even after the battle—verbal or otherwise—has finished. Diodorus notes that upon slaying their enemies, Gauls take up "singing a paean over them [the vanquished] and striking up a song of victory."[78] In this way, the sung word creates a symmetrical bordering of the battle, with a song of boast and praise before the physical fighting begins followed by a song of triumph and victory once it ends.

Elements of orality permeate all aspects of Gallic social society, both on the level of the individual and at the larger scale. This section has largely examined Diodorus' attestation of interpersonal oral practices and placed them in dialogue with those of comparable oral cultures. As we will see, the evidence is limited neither to Diodorus nor to the accounts of one-on-one communication, as the war accounts of Julius Caesar indicate also the existence of vast and

[78] Diodorus Siculus and Oldfather, "The Library of History," 5.29.3.

complex information networks across Gaul that are rooted in the ability to skillfully retain, manage, and transmit information orally.

Large-Scale Information Transmission

While Caesar's description of his enemies in *The Gallic Wars* should obviously be treated with appropriate skepticism, his account of their means of information transmission indicates a genuine sense of irritation and anxiety. He repeatedly states his scorn and distaste for the Gauls' tendency towards 'rumor' and their desire for whatever news or information could be gleaned from others. This displeasure is understandable; in war, information is everything. If the Gauls proved to be adept at obtaining and transmitting information orally, that could have posed a genuine threat to Caesar's war efforts. In truth, Caesar's account indicates that the Gauls had skilled methods of oral information sharing across large distances, as well as structures in place that enabled these 'rumors' to be managed for the benefit of the community. To put it simply, the Gauls were both good at acquiring intelligence and managing it.

Midway through the *Commentaries*, Caesar notes that he is untrusting of the Gauls given their fickleness (*infirmitatem*) and revolutionary tendencies (*novis plerumque rebus student*). To back up this claim, he describes a custom—probably observed by his scouts—of Gallic townspeople collecting information from traders and other travelers. He recalls that:

> Indeed, it is the custom of the Gauls to compel travelers—even those reluctant to stop—to yield while they inquire about everything the traveler had heard or learned of. In towns, the people surround merchants and compel them to recount wherever they came from and whatever things they learned there. Prone to being excitable, Gauls often base their plans about the most serious matters on these accounts and other hearsay, of which they need to immediately rethink since they are slaves to uncertain rumors. Most people tell them falsities that they want to hear.[79]

[79] Caesar, *The Gallic War,* 4.5, my translation.

Caesar views these actions scornfully, admonishing the people of Gaul for their inconsistency, faith in the accounts of others, and excitability. Beneath this condescension, though, there was probably a very real feeling of irritation on Caesar's part towards Gallic communication-sharing methods. Call it gossip, call it gathering intel—either way, the result is the same. At the end of the day, the Gauls acquired pertinent information through the oral recollections of the visiting travelers. Since they preferred not to utilize writing, the people of Gaul instead chose to wield their orality, using the spoken word to acquire and share intel. Beneath Caesar's scorn and anxiety about 'rumors' exists a description of a society sharing information among its members in the best way they know how: orally.

Caesar goes on to describe government management of these 'false rumors,' claiming that

> the states which are considered more favorable in governing their republic have decreed by law that if anyone were to learn anything pertaining to the republic by rumor or gossip from their neighbors they must bring it to the magistracy for them to do what they will with it and not share it with anyone else. This is because, as is known, rash and ignorant men are often alarmed by false rumors, and are impelled to act and make decisions about the most important things. The magistracy appears to conceal whatever they wish, and only makes known to the multitude what they deem to be useful. Telling anything regarding the republic is not allowed unless through the council.[80]

This excerpt is dripping with disdain and clear propagandistic intentions, but the underlying reality shines through. At the core of this paragraph is the fact that certain Gallic states require that information gleaned through 'rumor or gossip' should be shared with the magistracy such that they might be better informed in their decisions, especially in wartime. Caesar attempts to paint this as an elitist practice that suppresses the rights of the multitude since the people only have access to what the magistracy chooses to share. In truth, this just seems like a reasonable way to manage the dissemination of oral information, especially given the circumstances of war.

---

[80] Caesar, *The Gallic War,* 6.20, my translation.

Wars are won and lost by the quality of information ascertained by each side. As Allied anti-spying propaganda reminded civilians and others in World War II: loose lips sink ships. For Caesar, Gallic inquisitiveness posed a threat to his campaign given that he was in *their* home territory and wished to continue a divide-and-conquer approach among the Gallic tribes. The information acquired from outside traders about Roman attacks on other Gallic communities could easily lead to an uncontrollable or unfavorable response from all manner of Gauls—allies, enemies, and otherwise. Perhaps they would hear about the slaughter of their kinsmen, about an imminently approaching army, about the treatment of pro- and anti-Roman tribes, about Roman military tactics, or about any variety of potentially tide-turning intel. Having an enemy with a thirst for knowledge, news, and rumors could be quite dangerous while on campaign. As such, Caesar seems genuinely concerned about the efficient way in which the people of Gaul wielded their oral skills on behalf of the war effort.

This valuing of information, willingness to share, and impressive ability to do so becomes a problem Caesar has to confront again later in the war for Gaul. In Book 7, he says that

> wherever major and very remarkable news is made known, they notify people through the fields and regions by shouting, others successively take up this news and relate it to those nearby, as it then happened. For what had occurred in Cenabum with the sunrise was heard in the borders of the Arverni before the first watch had finished, which is a distance of about 150 miles.[81]

The amount of realism in this account is debatable, but the sentiment at its core remains the same. In this excerpt, Caesar indicates that not only are the tribes of Gaul adept at conveying information, but also they can do so quickly. The existence of networks of communication across the vast expanse of Gaul is not outside the realm of possibility, especially considering that the region is rife with navigable rivers.[82] The reality of individuals just yelling at each other across

[81] Caesar, *The Gallic War,* 7.3, my translation.
[82] Bauer, "Language Loss in Gaul," 26.

fields to spread information may or may not be true, but long-distance communication surely is. Beyond that, this passage implies a certain level of competency and skill in transmission given that 150 miles is an impressive distance. Evidently, the Gallic manner of communicating among tribes and outsiders is more than mere ‘rumors’ or gossip. For a game of ‘telephone’ to work across nearly 150 American miles within a single day requires a fair amount of consistency, trust, and precision that *rumor* doesn’t seem to cover. What it *does* indicate is an ability to effectively wield the oral word in a manner so skillful that it threatened the campaign of Julius Caesar.

This chapter has covered a broad range of oral practices, from something as small as a riddle to something large like cross-country communication. The ancient sources, no matter how much they misunderstood their subjects, clearly contain evidence of the ability of Gauls to utilize and wield orality in ways that both strengthened and protected the community.

Chapter 3: Institutionalized Orality

Within the extant sources, Gallic society is shown to have institutionalized the oral tradition in its employment of multiple different types of oral experts. Orality is a vital pillar in upholding the social, scientific, legal, historical, and medical knowledge of Gallic society, and as such, individuals long-trained in various oral arts occupy a notable place in Gallic hierarchy—a place so notable that *all* ethnographies of the Gauls see it fit to mention their oral wise men. The elite status of oral experts is not only a testament to the significance of the spoken word in this primarily oral society but also to the integral nature of these occupations in the maintenance of a functioning society. While public speakers are valued in most societies—priests, wise men, politicians, verbal artists, etc.—the ancient sources on Gaul made it clear that not only were these oral professionals valued, but that they performed roles that kept Celtic society together.

Each of the extant sources attests to the existence of at least one elite orality-centered occupation, though most outline two to three of these verbal experts, each with their own realm of expertise. This discrepancy in quantity should serve to remind us that these sources—Posidonius, Diodorus, Strabo, and Caesar—are all foreigners to Gaul. Already this outsider perspective causes a nebulous understanding of Celtic cultural structures and norms, and the seeming similarities between the various oral occupations allow for elisions and misunderstandings. While it is true that each class of experts utilizes, wields, and performs oral works, the content and function of each differ. An additional shortcoming of this evidence is its limited scope. This is an analysis only of sources in the Posidonian tradition, and as such, the evidence for connections between oral experts and certain institutions is occasionally scant. That does not mean that oral experts were not involved in the processes that go unmentioned or are marginal in this thesis, merely that this evidence in particular says little about these subjects. If

one were to widen their analysis to include later sources that relate to the Gauls, like Pliny's *Natural History* or the Larzac Tablet, other aspects of society would certainly be shown as under the purview of these oral experts. However, those sources are beyond the scope of this argument.

In this section, I will outline the various oral classes attested to have existed in Gaul in order of the quantity of evidence, starting with the occupation least recorded, the *parasites*, followed by bards and *vates,* which have mostly the same amount of evidence, and ending with the Druids. After providing a brief overview of what the sources have to say about each class, I will outline how these occupations provide the undergirding for a large portion of Gallic social institutions and community maintenance, including, but not limited to, timekeeping and history, law, religion, social order, and science.

i. Oral Occupations in Sum

Parasites

The first oral experts in question are those called *parasites* by Posidonius, though they are not mentioned in any other source. Athenaeus quotes Posidonius directly:

> Posidonius of Apameia, in the twenty-third book of his *Histories*, says: 'The Celts have in their company even in war (as well as in peace) companions whom they call parasites [*παρασίτους*]. These men pronounce their praises before the whole assembly and before each of the chieftains in turn as they listen. Their entertainments are called Bards [*βάρδοι*]. These are poets who deliver eulogies in song.[83]

Tierney, in his analysis of the Posidonian Gallic ethnographic tradition, rightly identifies two separate classes in this Posidonian excerpt, respectively the *parasites*—an "honorary herald (like the Homeric heralds) who opened the proceedings at the council (Caesar's *senatus*) and called on

[83] *Athenaeus VI 49, p. 246CD,* in Tierney, "The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius."

each chieftain by his honorific genealogy"—and the bards.[84] The etymology and definition of *parasite* further affirm this description.

Parasite (*παράσιτος*) comes from Greek *para-* (*παρά*), meaning alongside, and *sitos* (*σῖτος*), food.[85] Together and at its simplest, this means 'dining companion,' though in practice means "one who eats at the table of another, and repays him with flattery and buffoonery," as the entry in Liddell, Scott, and Jones' Greek-English lexicon states.[86] While these *parasites* are a form of entertainment similar to the bards, their duties differ in that *parasites* produce praises and flattery towards tribal leaders and significant men. Not much can be said about the class beyond what Posidonius outlines or the dictionary definition gleans, considering that this is the *only* account that mentions the *parasites* at all.

Bards

In this quotation of Posidonius by Atheanaeus, he states that "Their entertainments are called Bards [*βάρδοι*]. These are poets who deliver eulogies in song."[87] The other Posidonian sources include bards in their descriptions of Gallic oral occupations, so we are not limited to a single account as with *parasites.* In his *Geography*, Strabo says equally little about bards as Athenaeus, stating that

> Among all the Gallic peoples, generally speaking, there are three sets of men who are held in exceptional honor; the Bards [*Βάρδοι*], the Vates [*Οὐάτεις*] and the Druids [*Δρυΐδαι*]. The Bards are singers and poets…[88]

There are a few divergences in Strabo and Athenaeus regarding descriptions of bards, but they are overall in harmony with one another. In contrast with Athenaeus' quotation, Strabo finds it

---

[84] Tierney, "The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius," 203.
[85] *A Greek-English Lexicon,* ed. Liddell, Scott, and Jones, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), s.v. "σῖτος;" *Ibid.,* "παρά."
[86] *Ibid., "*παράσιτος."
[87] *Athenaeus VI 49, p. 246CD,* in Tierney, "The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius."
[88] Strabo and Jones, "Geography," 4.4.4.

necessary to describe the important place in society given to bards and other exceptionally honored oral experts. Strabo also leaves out Posidonius' specific claim that bards perform songs of praise, saying merely that they perform rather than specifying what genre. Despite the minor omissions or elisions in each writer, Strabo and Posidonius (through Athenaeus) remain mostly in agreement about the bards and their oral expertise as centered around musical and compositional ability.

In his ethnography, Diodorus describes the bards in a similar fashion:

> Among them are also to be found lyric poets whom they call Bards (*Βάρδους*). These men sing to the accompaniment of instruments which are like lyres, and their songs may be either of praise or of obloquy.[89]

Diodorus is slightly more descriptive than Strabo and Athenaeus, making note of both the bards' instrumental abilities and the content of their compositions. It is probable that similar to his divergences from Athenaeus, Strabo found it unnecessary to note the use of instruments because it would have been assumed by his audience that the bards would have an accompaniment. Diodorus' mention of bardic songs of 'praise or of obloquy' is unsurprising, considering earlier in the same passage he describes Gauls as 'boasters and threateners' who like to 'extol themselves and depreciate all other men.' The practices of bards in this way provide ample evidence for Diodorus' characterization of Gauls as bombastic in their oral practices.

In sum, bards are identified as, most simply put by Strabo, "singers and poets."[90] Athenaeus expands on this classification slightly, noting that their primary purpose was to provide entertainment through songs of praise. Diodorus says mostly the same, except he notes that the songs could be of obloquy as well as praise and that these songs are performed alongside backing instrumentals. Each Greco-Roman writer who mentions the bards of Gaul agrees about

[89] Diodorus Siculus and Oldfather, "The Library of History," 5.31.3.
[90] Strabo and Jones, "Geography," 4.4.4.

their primary function, as well as the term ‘bard’ itself. Presumably, Posidonius had glossed the Gallic word ‘bard’ in his Celtic ethnography given that each successive writer uses the same term.

The etymology of the term ‘bard’ further confirms the role of bards in society as described by the ancient sources. The *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Celtic* is a compilation of possible Celtic word roots and terms, determined by analyzing Proto-Indo-European (PIE) philology and comparing it to similar terms in extant languages in the Celtic language family. The entry for ‘bard,’ remains consistent with the definition given by ancient sources as well as with the word’s modern meaning:

***bardo-** ‘bard, poet’ [Noun]
GOID: MIr. *bard* [o m]
W: MW *bardd* [m]; *beirdd, beirddion, beirddiaid* [p]
BRET: MBret. *barz* [m]
CO: OCo. *barth* gl. mimus, scurra
GAUL: *bardos, *bardus* (Festus), *Bardo-magus* [Toponym]
PIE: *g^{w}erH- ‘praise’ (IEW: 478)
COGN: Skt. *gṛṇā́ti* ‘calls, praises’, Lat. *grātus* ‘grateful, pleasant, delightful’, Lith. *gìrti* ‘praise’
SEE: *bar-na- ‘proclaim’
ETYM: The PCelt. form is an old compound, PIE *g^{w}rH-$d^{h}h_{1}$o- ‘praise-maker’ (the second element is the verbal root *$d^{h}eh_{1}$- ‘do, make’ (Skt. *dá-dhā-ti*, etc.). Since PIE *g^{w}rH-$d^{h}h_{1}$o- should have given PCelt. **brādo- we [91]

Assuming that Proto-Celtic was the language used by the Celtic peoples who migrated into Western Europe during the Iron Age, it is clear that the meaning of ‘bard’ remained consistent throughout its use. Going forward in time, *bard* in Middle Irish—here listed as MIr. and spoken in its namesake country during the Middle Ages (c. 900-1200)—has the same form and meaning as its modern English cognate.[92] Going backward in time, the term for ‘bard’ in PIE, reconstructed as shown, comes from the words for ‘to make’ and ‘praise.’ The definition of a PIE

[91] Matasović, *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Celtic*, “*bardo-,” pp. 56.
[92] Britannica, “Irish,” www.britannica.com/topic/Celtic-languages/Irish.

bard as a ‘maker of praise’ fits extremely well with the definition given for Gallic bards by extant sources. Even more notably, unlike *parasite*, it can be discerned that the term ‘bard’ as attested by Posidonius was an indigenous word employed by the Gauls themselves. As such, it is probable that not only did this position truly exist in Gaul, but that its continued existence in Celtic cultures indicates the longevity and importance of its use in orality-centered practice.

Vates

The *Vates*, similar to the bards and *parasites*, are afforded relatively little in terms of description by the ethnographic sources. Of the four—Posidonius/Athenaeus, Strabo, Diodorus, and Caesar—only two mention the class at all, and only one by their Celtic name. The geographer Strabo here provides the most information in terms of title, as he says that

> Among all the Gallic peoples, generally speaking, there are three sets of men who are held in exceptional honor; the Bards (*Βάρδοι*), the Vates (*Οὐάτεις*) and the Druids (*Δρυΐδαι*)... The Vates [are] diviners and natural philosophers; while the Druids, in addition to natural philosophy, also study moral philosophy (Strabo 4.4.4)

Strabo makes it clear that the Druids and Vates are both philosophers, though they diverge in that Druids also study moral philosophy while the Vates practice divination. Apart from their name, the fact that they are within the upper echelon of highly-held classes, and a brief overview of their jurisdiction, Strabo provides relatively little to flesh out their role. Comparatively, Diodorus elaborates a fair amount more on the Vates’ responsibilities. He states that

> Philosophers, as we may call them, and men learned in religious affairs are unusually honored among them and are called by them Druids (*Δρονίδας*). The Gauls likewise make use of diviners (*μάντεσιν*), accounting them worthy of high approbation, and these men foretell the future by means of the flight or cries of birds and of the slaughter of sacred animals, and they have all the multitude subservient to them.[93]

In contrast to Strabo’s account, Diodorus switches the ordering and significance of the Vates—here called diviners—and the Druidic philosophers. As Diodorus sees it, the seers are

[93] Diodorus Siculus and Oldfather, “The Library of History,” 5.31.3.

praised as the upper echelon of society and divine the future through augury and haruspicy. Here the Druids are merely wise men practiced in philosophy and theology. While they, too, are 'unusually honored,' the soothsayers are both offered a longer description and a higher place in the social order by Diodorus. Despite his longer description and tendency to omit less than Strabo, Diodorus uses a term for these soothsayers which is notably Greek. Instead of using *Vates*, he merely calls them '*μάντεσιν*,' the Greek word for diviner, seer, or prophet. Strabo's term, on the other hand, could very plausibly have a basis in Celtic etymology and thus be something the Gauls themselves might have used.

Strabo's *Οὐάτεις* is cognate to the Latin 'Vates,' the term I use instead on account of its familiar script. *Οὐάτεις* would have been pronounced 'ou-āh-tes', and similarly, '*vātēs*' was said as 'wā-tēs.' Referring again to the *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Celtic*, the Proto-Celtic word for soothsayer or diviner is reconstructed as *wāti-, which is clearly sonically similar to 'wā-tēs' and 'ou-āh-tes.'

***wāti-** 'sooth-sayer, prophet' [Noun]
GOID: OIr. *fáith* [i m]
GAUL: *ouáteis* [p] (Strabo 4.4.4.)
PIE: *weh$_2$-ti- 'prophet' (IEW: 1113)
COGN: Lat. *uātēs* 'prophet', OE *wōd* 'inspiration'
SEE: *wātu- 'poetic inspiration'
ETYM: Lat. *uātēs* is often considered to be an old Celtic loanword, but de Vaan (2008: 656) thinks it is inherited. It is true that *uātēs* is rather isolated in Latin, but there are no compelling reasons to think it must have been borrowed from Celtic.
REF: LP 6, 65f., EIEC 707, Delamarre 308, de Bernardo Stempel 1999: 369, 375.

[94]

As can be seen above, the *Dictionary* also notes the close association between *wāti- and the Proto-Celtic *wātu-, a noun meaning 'poetic inspiration.' Presumably, the similarity between the

[94] Matasović, *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Celtic*, "*wāti-," pp. 404.

two can be attributed to the *Vates*' utilization of poetry to convey prophecies. It is likely, too, that these poetic predictions would be performed orally.

Druids

Discussion of Gallic oral experts would be incomplete and insubstantial without mentioning the most famous class in Celtic culture: the Druids. Every source—except for Athenaeus' excerpt of Posidonius—is in consensus in describing the Druids as respected and privileged philosophers with religio-legal jurisdiction. Examining only their introductory sentences about the Druids, Strabo says the least, stating that they are both moral and natural philosophers.[95] Diodorus agrees, calling them 'unusually honored' philosophers and 'men learned in religious affairs' in his opening statement.[96] Julius Caesar says the most, both in his introductory sentence and general discussion, stating that the Druids

> 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 honor.[97]

Even only by looking at the barest of descriptions, all three sources that mention the Druids agree that they are philosophers, and most simply, lovers of wisdom. The etymology of the term 'Druid' further confirms this basic definition, as its meaning of 'strong insight' fits well with their position as Gaul's knowledge experts.

[95] Strabo and Jones, "Geography," 4.4.4.
[96] Diodorus Siculus and Oldfather, "The Library of History," 5.31.3.
[97] Caesar and Edwards, "The Gallic War," 6.13.

***druwid-** 'priest, druid' [Noun]
GOID: OIr. *druí, druï* [d m]
GAUL: *druides* [Nom. p]
ETYM: The second element of this compound is the root of the verb *weyd- 'see, know' (Skt. *véda,* etc.). The first element is presumably PIE *derw-, *dru- 'oak' which metaphorically also meant 'strong, firm'. *druwid- is therefore the priest with 'strong insight'. The Welsh form *derwydd* and OBret. *dorguid* gl. pithonicus are actually parallel formations.
REF: LEIA D-202f., EIEC 598, Delamarre 149. [98]

Beyond this, the fact that 'druid' has cognates in Old Irish, Welsh, and Old Bretonic gives credence to the idea that this may truly be an indigenous Gallic term properly used in the Posidonian tradition.

Druids, as described by Caesar, Strabo, and Diodorus, fit well within the category of professional knowledge experts in oral society, acting as the backbone of numerous social institutions and holding supreme authority on a variety of community concerns. The Druids, in conjunction with the other varieties of oral experts, functioned as the undergirding of the entire society, a fact I intend to show by giving an overview of their jurisdictions as attested by the Posidonian ethnographies.

ii. Social Institutions & Maintenance of Community

Before examining the extent to which oral occupations were the backbone of vital elements in Gallic society, it is important to note that the categories imposed by this thesis are etic, rather than any delineation that the Gauls themselves would have distinguished. Much like the Roman division of Gaul mentioned in Chapter 1, this is an attempt to comprehend something unfamiliar, placing artificial boundaries so that cultural outsiders like ourselves may understand.

[98] Matasović, *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Celtic*, "*druwid-," pp. 107.

This is especially visible in the concept of 'religion.' Entire books have been written deconstructing the idea of 'religion' in antiquity, and how the modern perception of the 'religious' as easily delinable and separate from other aspects of life is inapplicable to the past.[99] However, for the purposes of this thesis, the 'religious' will simply be taken to mean anything relating to the divine, specifically gods or other actors that can confer prophecy onto the mortal. As will be seen, the lines between 'law' and 'religion,' let alone 'religion' and 'science' are extremely difficult to draw, if possible at all. As such, the aspects of relating to the divine that can be easily separated from the other categories as 'religious' in our terms, such as divination, will be, and those that exist in more of a grey area will simply be included with its associated 'secular' category.

Education

Education seems a fitting place to begin when describing Gallic social institutions, considering that knowledge-sharing and education are the foundations upon which everything else in society rests. The ancient sources attest to the fact that among their many roles, the Druids serve as teachers and repositories of knowledge. When discussing the Druids, Caesar attests that "a great number of young men gather about them for the sake of instruction and hold them in great honor."[100] The high esteem in which Druids are held is well in line with the position of knowledge experts in other oral cultures.

Arguably the most important occupation in an oral society is that of the wise man, those in the community whose role it is to retain and encode the most vital information for the continuation of society. Primarily oral cultures utilize oral means of encoding information rather

[99] See: Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion* (2013).
[100] Caesar and Edwards, "The Gallic War," 6.13.

than written ones. Information, after it is written down, can exist separately from the individual who textualized it in the first place. Orally retained information, however, does not exist outside of the individual. There can be physical objects, sights, smells, sounds, tastes, tactile experiences, or any other external stimuli that can aid in recalling memories, but those mnemonic devices do not exist as memory aids without the individual(s) for whom they assist. Orally transmitted knowledge is contained not in books or essays, but in individuals who specialize in learning, retaining, distributing, and perpetuating the immense amount of knowledge necessary to maintain a functioning society.

Given that they retain the most vital information upon which oral society depends, the experts in storing memory hold significant places in the social hierarchy. While the most basic knowledge can be diffuse throughout society, critical knowledge is often limited to these specialists so that it remains precise and undiluted.[101] Those who wish to access the full extent of the corpus of cultural knowledge—be it medical, legal, religious, historical, genealogical, or otherwise—must defer to the individuals who are specially trained to remember these vast swaths of information. As an example, the memory specialists of the Yoruba learn a large number of verses which

> encode, along with ritual instructions, knowledge of animals, plants and a pharmacopeia, how to protect against smallpox infection, navigation instructions, rules for trading, guidelines for the use of power and authority, methods for dispute resolution and cultural history, along with social and legal precedents.[102]

The Druids act similarly to the Yoruba oral experts in the Gallic context, serving as bastions of culture, history, morals, customs, and more. In order to perpetuate the existence of the class, thus ensuring the perpetuation of cultural knowledge, the Druids spend a significant amount of time educating the next generation of wise men.

---

[101] Kelly, *Knowledge and Power in Prehistoric Societies*, xvii.
[102] *Ibid.*, 88.

In an ethnographic gem of a quotation, Caesar spends a considerable amount of space describing how Druids pass on their immense knowledge in a manner characteristic of formalized education in an oral society.

> 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.[103]

The first half of this excerpt outlines practices that Caesar has learned of, either from his own scouts or Posidonius.[104] At the core of this quotation, Caesar makes it clear that the learning of Druids was deliberately retained through memorization alone and transmitted through the spoken word, which in retrospect is easy to identify as characteristic of oral cultures.

Caesar's writing makes it clear that Gallic youths engage in similar practices to other cultures in that they receive extensive teaching of verses, utterances, and probably songs orally so that they might retain and perpetuate the cultural knowledge held by the Druidic order. The basics of this knowledge bank are taught to children, then as a student is initiated into higher levels of knowledge, they are taught in a "pattern of increasing restriction as a knowledge becomes more complex."[105] It is only logical that as topics get more intricate, fewer people know all the details of said topic. Caesar, however, describes this knowledge as almost oppressive since "the common people occupy a position of near slavery…who no one turns to for council."[106] As

---

[103] Caesar and Edwards, "The Gallic War," 6.14.
[104] Webster, "At the End of the World," 10.
[105] Kelly, *Knowledge and Power in Prehistoric Societies*, 27.
[106] *Nam plebes paene servorum habetur loco, quae nihil audet per se, nullo adhibetur consilio*, Caes. *B. G.* 6.13.

a facet of this exclusion, Caesar notes that the Druids refuse to textualize their knowledge since "they do not want their teachings to be spread to the common people."[107]

Caesar describes the common people as slave-like with Druids as assistants to this enslavement, since the majority of cultural lore and law was restricted to an educated fraction of the Gallic population. This assumption of ill-intent is likely a misunderstanding of oral practices, though it served a beneficial propagandistic purpose as well. Even though Caesar makes it clear that it is a personal assumption (*Id mihi videntur*, 6.14*)*, he supposes that one of the reasons why Druidic doctrine is unwritten and restricted is so that the masses do not have access to it, thus remaining subservient to the Druids. However, if we examine the exclusionary nature of Druidic education, it becomes clear that the primary purpose of refusing to textualize their teachings is the continuation of the Gallic oral tradition. Oral traditions can be incredibly accurate and long-lasting vehicles of information, though in order to ensure the stability of the content "the repetition of the knowledge [must be] to a limited number of individuals under controlled circumstances."[108] By restricting oral traditions to a select group of people, the content of Druidic teaching can more easily be maintained accurately throughout time and "avoid[s] imperfect repetition of knowledge."[109] In addition, as Caesar notes, relying on writing can indeed weaken one's memory. Only allowing the knowledge to be passed down orally requires a far more thorough understanding of the material than if one has a text to refer back to at will. Lastly, the oral aspect of the information was likely integral in a cultural sense. The oral tradition contained information from ancestors and wise men from successive generations—some aspects of the tradition originating in past decades and centuries, if not millennia—and each preserver of the

---

[107] *Quod neque in vulgum disciplinam efferri velint*, Caes. *B. G.* 6.13.
[108] Kelly, *Knowledge and Power in Prehistoric Societies*, 27.
[109] *Ibid.*, 29.

tradition had learned, maintained, and perpetuated this vital knowledge in the same way. Textualizing this tradition would have been almost a betrayal of long-held cultural values.

Cultural Perpetuation

It is impossible to divine the full extent of what Gallic education included, though the nature of content in oral traditions and the Posidonian tradition both gesture towards certain subjects. One mode of encoding knowledge is through myth, which tends to act as both a means of recording events and as a guide for future action. In describing the nature of myths in ancient Greek culture, Johnstone states that

> insofar as they provided consistent, coherent explanations for the events of life, and to the extent that they comported with the practical experience of their auditors and thus 'made sense,' the Greek myths provided a structure within which practical decisions could be made and explained.[110]

Presumably, myths in Celtic society similarly acted as a framework for understanding the world and how all elements—human and other-than-human, earthly and celestial, social and personal—are situated within it. One of the only examples of Druidic teachings that the Posidonians attest to is concerning their progenitor god, Dis, and how his dark nature impacts Gallic timekeeping. Caesar states that

> The Gauls affirm that they are all descended from a common father, Dis, and say that this is the tradition of the Druids. For that reason they determine all periods of time by the number, not of days, but of nights, and in their observance of birthdays and the beginnings of months and years day follows night.[111]

This example alone indicates that the Gauls had mythologized their social origins as a group, and it is not unreasonable to assume that aspects of the rest of the mythological corpus would serve the same ordering purpose, especially in regards to "how the individual and the social group 'fit

[110] Johnstone, "Singing the Muses' Song," 26.
[111] Caesar and Edwards, "The Gallic War," 6.18.

into' the order of things."[112] Descriptions of social ordering inherently situate one in the context of their interactions with others, so these myths and other oral traditions likely conveyed proper moral behavior and social hierarchies in the present while referring to histories and genealogies of the past.

While the Druids undeniably played an important part in the perpetuation of cultural knowledge, they were not the *only* oral class that upheld Gallic cultural institutions. The bards are universally understood by the ancient sources to be musical poets who served as entertainment, though the content of their songs besides 'praise or obloquy' is left unsaid. It is logical to assume that the repertoire of tales and stories accessible to the bards were either already in the cultural consciousness as myth or generally known events. The role of the Gallic bard might be similar to that of a bard in the Greek Iron Age, another primarily oral society. It is from the tradition of these ancient Greek bards that epics such as the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* were initially performed, as they told musical stories of the mythical past that were altered with each telling but were comprised of familiar formulaic content. The historicity of these Homeric tales is dubious, though the mythological content acts as an explanation for natural and man-made phenomena, and as a guide for proper conduct (or in the case of many of the Homeric heroes, what *not* to do). The Homeric epics are but a small fraction of the rich bardic oral tradition that existed in Greece before the advent of writing, as only these examples were recorded. The content of the Gallic oral tradition, however, was never textualized, and as such is subsequently lost to time.[113] Though, similar to the Druids, they too probably contributed to the repetition of Gallic myth and history, in addition to providing entertainment to all who listened. Bards are also

[112] Johnstone, "Singing the Muses' Song," 17.
[113] Though one can probably find small elements of Gallic mythology in early epic Irish poetry or possibly Celtic saints. See: Johnson-Sheehan, Richard, and Paul Lynch. "Rhetoric of Myth, Magic, and Conversion," 2007.

described as singing songs "of praise or obloquy," which serves to solidify the social order by reaffirming or admonishing one's actions within the community.

The *parasites*, as scant as the evidence is, occupied a similar niche as the bards, though the subjects of their songs were more firmly rooted in perpetuating familiar social hierarchies. The main subjects of these heralds were individual and genealogical praise—two topics that find frequent expression in most oral cultures. In this case, the *parasites* were tasked with publicly praising important Gauls in dining contexts and beyond in a manner that simultaneously reaffirmed hierarchy and solidified social cohesion. By praising elite individuals and their notable genealogies, *parasites* both uphold the praised's position in society and hold them accountable to living up to the prestige of the position. Invoking the notable and honorable deeds of an elite individual's ancestors in front of others induces a kind of social pressure that serves to regulate the actions of the elite. Their actions will be remembered and assimilated into the history of the tribe, and if they fail to live up to expectations, their name will be a blight on their entire lineage.

Apart from regulating the actions of powerful people, reciting praises also strengthens the social bonds between the *parasite*, the praised, and the larger community. As a result of singing their praises, an emotional bond is fostered between the *parasite* and the elite individual in question, such that "'communities of sentiment' are brought into being."[114] Even if members of the community are not directly related to the individual's lineage, the recitation solidifies the information in social memory and history, which in turn aids in formulating a community identity. A group identity "is constructed through shared practices and discourses… to be part of a collective group such as a nation one has to share and adopt the group's history."[115] By

[114] Basu, "Practices of Praise and Social Constructions of Identity," 83.
[115] Assmann, "Transformations between History and Memory," 53.

solidifying these lineages and the histories that accompany them, the *parasites* contribute to the creation of a sense of group identity that serves as a means of connection between community members.

In short, by perpetuating and sharing these tales and histories, mythological and concrete, Gallic oral experts maintained social connection and cohesion. Shared cultural knowledge and events provided subjects that community members could converse with one another about and formulate a collective identity around. When these common cultural moments were about specific elite families and histories, they in turn regulated the actions of important figures in society. Powerful individuals had to act in a manner that was accepted and beneficial within the community, lest bards and *parasites* refused to sing their praises or even sing about their wrongdoings. Through their roles as knowledge repositories, storytellers, and performers, the various oral experts in Gallic society acted as the bonding agent for the community as a whole.

Law & Order

Oral occupations in Gaul contributed to community cohesion not only through the creation and perpetuation of shared cultural subjects but also through the recitation and retention of the society's laws and customs. In his seminal work on orality, Ong states that "the law itself in oral cultures is enshrined in formulaic sayings, proverbs, which are not mere juris-prudential decorations, but themselves constitute the law." Within Gallic society, the Druids retained and perpetuated these formulaic sayings and other oral forms that enshrined social law, acting as both the legal authorities in Gaul and the physical embodiment of the law. Strabo states that

> the decision, not only of the private disputes, but of the public disputes as well; so that, in former times, they even arbitrated cases of war and made the opponents stop when they

> were about to line up for battle, and the murder cases, in particular, had been turned over to them for decision.[116]

The role of the Druidic knowledge experts in public disputes (i.e. disputes with foreign entities) is well-attested in both Posidonian evidence and Caesar's account of major players in the Gallic War. Diodorus describes the same event of Gallic oral experts stepping out in the middle of hostilities to halt a battle.

> Nor is it only in the exigencies of peace, but in their wars as well, that they obey, before all others, these men [Druids] and their chanting poets, and such obedience is observed not only by their friends but also by their enemies; many times, for instance, when two armies approach each other in battle with swords drawn and spears thrust forward, these men step forth between them and cause them to cease, as though having cast a spell over certain kinds of wild beasts. In this way, even among the wildest barbarians, does passion give place before wisdom, and Ares stands in awe of the Muses.[117]

This excerpt identifies not only the Druids but also a second class of oral experts described as 'chanting poets' (*μελῳδοῦσι ποιηταῖς*). As 'chanting poets' is not a proper title, it is not possible to discern what other known oral occupation this is referring to exactly. However, based on Posidonius' description of the *parasites* as companions 'even in war (as well as in peace),' I would guess these chanting poets are most likely the *parasites*, as no source attests to the bards' presence in matters of war. Regardless of what class exactly is depicted alongside the Druids as individuals with supreme power over war, their significant place in society as arbiters of justice and order is exemplified all the same.

Their role as major political players in disputes with foreign nations is exemplified in a real historical figure described by both Julius Caesar and Cicero: Divitiacus the Aeduan Druid. In *De Divinatione*, Cicero writes a dialogue between himself and his brother, and in his discussion of the relationship between political power and divination mentions the Druids, stating that

---

[116] Strabo and Jones, "Geography," 4.4.4.
[117] Diodorus Siculus and Oldfather, "The Library of History," 5.31.5.

> indeed there are Druids in Gaul…I knew one of them myself, Divitiacus, the Aeduan, your guest and eulogist. He claimed to have an understanding of nature which the Greeks call 'physiologia,' and he used to make predictions, sometimes by means of augury (*auguriis*) and sometimes by means of soothsaying (*coniectura*).[118]

This excerpt makes clear that Divitiacus is described as a Druid, both in title and jurisdiction, but the extent of his political role is found not in *De Divinatione* but in Caesar's *Gallic Wars*. Divitiacus, spelled by Caesar as Diviciacus, played a significant role in bringing Caesar into Gaul in the first place, as in the face of encroaching enemy German tribes, Diviciacus fled to Rome to ask for their assistance.[119] However, the schism between himself and his brother Dumnorix, an enemy of the Romans, initially placed the siblings on opposite sides of the Gallic War.[120] Diviciacus was closely allied with Caesar, and upon learning of Dumnorix's hostility, Caesar

> summoned together the Aeduan chiefs, of whom he had a great number in his camp, among them Diviciacus and Liscus, who presided over the highest magistracy, called Vergobret [*dispenser of judgement*] by the Aedui: the magistrate is elected annually, and holds the power of life and death over his fellow-countrymen.[121]

Later on, after various Roman-allied Gallic leaders held a convention with Caesar's consent to discuss the troubles within Gaul, it was Diviciacus who spoke on behalf of the other chiefs.[122] In this scant description of Diviciacus, it is clear that he acts as a representative in foreign affairs, managing the Aedui's relationship with Rome, the other tribes of Gaul, and relations with the Germans. Presumably, his role as dispenser of judgment grants him the power to deal with external troubles as they impact his community, since how he chooses to deal with threats to his tribe has implications for both their lives and deaths. This responsibility for the well-being of his

---

[118] Cicero and Falconer, "De Divinatione," 1.41.90.
[119] Caesar and Edwards, "The Gallic War," 1.31.
[120] *Ibid.,* 1.16.
[121] *Ibid.*
[122] *Ibid.,* 1.31.

people insofar as law and order are concerned extends not only to how the society deals with external dangers but to internal ones as well.

In regard to private disputes (i.e. disputes within the community), Caesar states that

> it is they [Druids] who decide in almost all disputes, public and private; and if any crime has been committed, or murder done, or there is any dispute about succession or boundaries, they also decide it, determining rewards and penalties… if any person does not abide by their decision, they ban such from sacrifice, which is their heaviest penalty.[123]

This role of the Druids is unsurprising, especially considering that in oral cultures "dispute resolution takes a prescribed, often ceremonial, form… usually involving the skill of specialist orators who act on behalf of others needing their skills."[124] Caesar's account notes that in Gallic culture, Druids were specialist orators, dictating dispute proceedings, penalties or rewards, and ultimately overseeing punishment. The other sources agree with Caesar on the legal role of Druids.

Strabo states that "the murder cases, in particular, had been turned over to them [the Druids] for decision,"[125] and often the punishment prescribed for crimes within the community was execution.[126] Caesar and Diodorus both intertwine this capital punishment with the divine, claiming that this form of retribution was believed to be "in honor of the gods" or "more pleasing to the immortal gods."[127] Here the grey area between what we consider to be the categories of law and religion is most visible. By some definitions, these executions are the legal system of the Gauls at work; by others, these killings as they relate to the divine are more akin to human sacrifice. Attempting to draw the line between the two is beyond the scope of this paper,

---

[123] Caesar and Edwards, "The Gallic War," 6.13.
[124] Kelly, *Knowledge and Power in Prehistoric Societies*, 23.
[125] Strabo and Jones, "Geography," 4.4.4.
[126] Caesar and Edwards, "The Gallic War," 6.16.
[127] Diodorus Siculus and Oldfather, "The Library of History," 5.32.6-7, Caesar and Edwards, "The Gallic War,"6.16, respectively.

however, it is undeniable that these oral experts were integral to both the political and the religious, whichever way one chooses to delineate the two.

Religion

As stated previously, the concept of 'religion' in antiquity is nebulous at best, but for our purposes, the 'religious' should be regarded as something that relates to communing with, contacting, and understanding the divine, though this last aspect tends to bleed into the realm of science as well. While the divine likely permeated all aspects of life, the oral occupations most associated with contacting the divine are the Vates and the Druids.

Caesar makes it clear that religion was highly valued, stating that "the whole nation of the Gauls is greatly devoted to ritual observances."[128] In a world in which everything is influenced, if not determined, by the gods, it is only reasonable that humans make a concerted effort to obtain their favor. While divine will and insight can be witnessed in any number of forms—animal movements, sacred entrails, weather events, celestial abnormalities, dreams, etc.—only a select few have the knowledge and training to properly interpret these messages. In this case, the Vates and the Druids each contribute to understanding the desires of the gods, working in tandem to ensure that the divine remains favorable towards their people while operating in their particular realms of expertise.

Across the empire and across time, the Druids are primarily identified in terms of their knowledge of the divine. At their most basic, Diodorus calls them "men learned in religious affairs [who] are unusually honored among them [the Gauls]."[129] While this description gets the point across, Caesar provides a more expansive illustration of their duties, stating that the Druids are "concerned with divine worship, the due performance of sacrifices, and the interpretation of

[128] Caesar and Edwards, "The Gallic War," 6.16.
[129] Diodorus Siculus and Oldfather, "The Library of History," 5.31.3.

ritual questions."[130] While the Druids observe the performance of sacrifices, they are described as overseers or administrators rather than as the ones actually performing the sacrifice. Even so, the Posidonian sources are in complete agreement that the Druids *must* be present for a sacrifice to be legitimate.[131] Diodorus states that

> it is a custom of theirs that no one should perform a sacrifice without a "philosopher"; for thank-offerings should be rendered to the gods, they say, by the hands of men who are experienced in the nature of the divine, and who speak, as it were, the language of the gods, and it is also through the mediation of such men, they think, that blessings likewise should be sought.[132]

As part of their intense and long oral education, Druids learn the *language* of the gods and what is and isn't proper ritual action through the precedence of oral tradition. Since they speak the language of the divine and understand their nature, the Druids must be present to act as a kind of divine interpreter if an individual or group wishes to beseech the divine for assistance or to communicate thanks for prior aid. However, like an interpreter, the Druids merely translate what has been said, rather than producing the original divine utterance. Vates, on the other hand, are likely the ones physically sacrificing the victims and acting as haruspex, reading the entrails and producing the raw material to be understood by the Druids.

Strabo defines the Vates simply as diviners.[133] While Diodorus does not use the title 'Vates,' he does describe the nature of their occupation.

> The Gauls likewise make use of diviners, accounting them worthy of high approbation, and these men foretell the future by means of the flight or cries of birds and the slaughter of sacred animals… having learned to place confidence in an ancient and long-continued practice of observing such matters.[134]

---

[130] Caesar and Edwards, "The Gallic War," 6.13.
[131] Strabo and Jones, "Geography," 4.4.5.
[132] Diodorus Siculus and Oldfather, "The Library of History," 5.31.4.
[133] Strabo and Jones, "Geography," 4.4.4.
[134] Diodorus Siculus and Oldfather, "The Library of History," 5.31.3.

Acting as an augur by interpreting birds and as haruspex by reading the entrails of slaughtered animals is far from uncommon in Mediterranean religion, and serves a significant role in the community. A seer, otherwise referred to as a diviner, soothsayer, prophet, or oracle, occupies a special place in society as someone who is "able not only to read the signs that the gods send, but also, by employing the correct sacrificial rites, to avert bad omens whenever possible."[135] Any layperson can see an eclipse should they (and the planets) be in the right place at the right time; only an expert has the ability to both interpret divine will as indicated by the omen and recall the proper means of recourse to ensure godly blessings or avoid misfortune. Through their understanding of the divine, Druids and Vates each provide earthly guidance to those in their community by receiving the messages of the divine, properly interpreting them, and then knowing the correct course of action to ensure the best results. If these oral experts perform their roles properly, the community will be in harmony with the will of the gods.

Science & Timekeeping

As part of their understanding of the divine, the Druids naturally are well-educated in the nature of the gods and how they are connected to man, in addition to how this influences the way Gauls understand the world they inhabit. Caesar states that the Gauls believe "that they are all descended from a common [divine] father, Dis, and say that this is the tradition of the Druids." Dis Pater is likely a Roman gloss for a similar chthonic and nocturnal deity in the Celtic pantheon,[136] though he is of note because as Caesar continues, "for that reason, they determine all periods of time by the number, not of days, but of nights."[137] Considering this explicit connection between the divine and the calendrical, it makes sense that timekeeping and astronomy are under

[135] Flower, "The Role and Image of the Seer," 80.
[136] Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Dis Pater." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 15, 2018.
[137] Caesar and Edwards, "The Gallic War," 6.18.

Druidic purview. While astronomy, can fall under the category of religion, as it is connected to divine celestial beings, this aspect does not reside *only* in the realm of the religious. Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, it is easier to include it under the scientific category.

The subjects of study for the Druids are deeply intertwined with one another in a way we might now call interdisciplinary, considering how the divine, the celestial, and the temporal all relate to one another in Gallic tradition. The ability to track and predict celestial bodies, and knowledge about the earth's movements were both vital for marking time, so these were naturally part of Druidic study. Caesar states that

> they [Druids] have many discussions as touching the stars and their movement, the size of the universe and of the earth, the order of nature, the strength and the powers of the immortal gods, and hand down their lore to the young men.[138]

As we know, understanding the rotations and revolutions of the earth, moon, sun, and stars are important for marking a calendar—whether the society in question measures time by the moon's orbit, the earth's revolutions around the sun, or the movement of constellations.

The Druids' involvement with these subjects exemplifies their oral function in a twofold manner. Firstly, as stated before, calendars are inextricable from celestial study, and research has shown that "astronomy is among the prominent genres of knowledge stored by oral cultures," as it is used to regulate social activity and monitor resources.[139] As a result of its significance in oral cultures, Lynne Kelly argues that "as control of the ceremonial and agricultural calendar is a powerful role within most, if not all, traditional [oral] cultures, astronomical knowledge is seen as a key indicator of a knowledge elite."[140] The ethnographic description of Druids as monitoring the calendar and celestial events, as well as their knowledge of other key subjects, is well in line with Kelly's description of the knowledge elite in other oral cultures. In addition to being a

[138] Caesar and Edwards, "The Gallic War," 6.14.
[139] Kelly, *Knowledge and Power in Prehistoric Societies*, 115-6.
[140] *Ibid.*, xxv.

common part of the oral tradition, knowledge of celestial movements is also an element in maintaining these traditions. To memorize the entirety of any oral tradition, the experts must utilize a variety of mnemonic devices for ease of recall, with one possible device being celestial bodies. Kelly states that

> individual stars, as well as constellations, also act as mnemonic structures to other aspects of the knowledge system. The fixed, sequential positions of bodies in the night sky offer a perfect structure for the index to components of knowledge.[141]

Using star movements to remember information can be difficult to comprehend for individuals who do not do so, but in short, the predictable sequence of the stars can act as a mnemonic device for recalling information, especially information that has relevance at specific times of the year. For example, every time I look at the Big Dipper, I think about Polaris, then I think about its association with Ursa Minor and Major, and how that means Little and Big Bear, respectively. So, just looking at these few stars grouped together under an arbitrary name leads my brain down a path of recalling associated information. Thinking of it this way, it becomes easier to understand how one might look up at a constellation that is most prominent in Spring and think about all the farming practices, celebration days, ritual events, and other knowledge that is most relevant to that time of year.

While the Posidonian sources do not mention Druidic knowledge of the natural sciences apart from their discussions of 'the order of nature' and natural philosophy, Druids almost certainly had extensive knowledge of the natural world around them. As the knowledge experts in Gallic society, the Druids would, out of necessity, have to understand how the world around them functioned and how that was then encoded into the oral tradition.[142] Their knowledge of herbs, seasons, animal movements, medicine, and other fields of inquiry was undeniably

---

[141] Kelly, *Knowledge and Power in Prehistoric Societies*, 120.
[142] There is evidence for Druidic expertise regarding herbs and medicinals in Pliny's *Natural History*, however, this work is beyond the scope of this thesis. See: Pliny *N. H.* 30.4 and 16.95.

scientific and likely gathered from generations of wise men, compiling a corpus of 'folk science' that was, at its core, just science.

iii. Oral Occupations in Society

Despite the fact that the evidence for Gallic oral occupations is incomplete and etic, the omnipresence of these experts in various sectors of society nevertheless shines through in the Posidonian accounts *because* they were such vital aspects of Gallic society. In their brief extant ethnographies, Caesar, Diodorus, Strabo, and Posidonius (via Athenaeus) indicate the existence of multiple orality-centered classes in society, all held in high esteem. These experts—the *parasites*, bards, Vates, and Druids—were so highly regarded in Gallic society because their knowledge and expertise acted as the undergirding for a significant amount of the social institutions that kept society functioning.

The evidence indicates their roles in the realms of education, cultural perpetuation, social cohesion, law, religion, and the sciences, though oral occupations almost certainly held purview over other social institutions. Despite the many barriers that obscure Gallic orality—the fact that none of the extant sources were committed to writing a full ethnography of Gaul, Posidonius' account is now lost to time, and the biases of Greco-Roman sources—the little evidence that does exist paints a vivid picture of a society upheld by oral practice and specialized experts.

Conclusion

History is far from a stable or objective thing. The stories we tell are heavily influenced by our conceptions of community and culture, which are both largely determined by structures of power. In the manuscript of history, Gaul, if mentioned at all, is found in the marginalia at best. Interest in the discourse patterns and language practices of the 'barbarians' living in pre-conquest Gaul is even more of a niche subject. This thesis is an attempt to rectify the obscurity of Gaul in the historical record. A considerable part of the reason why so little information on Gaul comes down from antiquity is a result of its oral nature, but, even as a historian working with texts, I would not change that for the world.

Oral elements were vital aspects of Gallic culture and even within the scant information that remains, that fact shines through. Within the varied ethnographic passages of Posidonius, Diodorus, Strabo, and Julius Caesar are hidden gems of pre-conquest Gallic orality. Chapter 2 of this thesis illustrated some examples of interpersonal and community communication in Gaul. In his *Library*, Diodorus provides unique examples of Celtic discursive practices with the characteristic themes of antagonism, praise/blame, and ancestry, demonstrating the multiplicity of uses for and competencies in oral tradition. Caesar illustrates Gallic oral practice in more concrete contexts, noting how easily information spreads among the continental Celts. While he conveys this in an admonishing tone, it is clear that these frustrations come from the genuine threat that Gallic orality posed to the Roman war effort. The examples of interpersonal orality and 'rumors' are described as rather informal means of transferring information, but they are far from the only aspect of orality in Gaul.

Chapter 3 outlined the more institutional side of Gallic orality through the description of various attested oral occupations. The sources differ in describing the types and quantities of oral

experts, but all together can be taken as depicting at least four different classes: the Druids, Vates, bards, and *parasites.* Together, these oral experts specialized in the realms of the cultural, legal, educational, religious, scientific, and more. The functions of each occupation vary with some overlap but combine as a collective to form the undergirding of Gallic society. As obscure as Gaul and its oral wordsmiths are, the story of an oral culture oppressed by a colonizing power is easily applicable to various civilizations throughout history.

The political story of Gaul is similar to that of many nations, particularly those in the Global South and indigenous groups in the imperial core. If one wishes to understand the colonizing nature of both Britain and the United States, one must first understand the colonial projects of both Greece and Rome. Gaul was colonized, to varying degrees, by both. Gaul and its people, as a result of the imperial and colonial interests of a dominating power, had their towns destroyed, their culture manipulated, and their society devastated. Gallic Vercingetorix finds his parallel in Metacomet, chief of the Pokanokets in what is now the United States: both men were charismatic and dynamic leaders who united a variety of disparate tribes to expel a colonizing force. Both men were tragically defeated. The number of lives lost and epistemologies destroyed as a result of these imperial ambitions are innumerable. If we want to avoid future similar atrocities, we must look to and learn from the past, understanding the present as a product of its historical roots and context. While the experiences of ancient colonized peoples and more contemporary ones are not exactly the same, there is merit in putting them in dialogue. We should always remember that ancient people were, at their core, just people.

While the repetition of atrocities throughout time is a notable exception to the rule, there is beauty in the awareness that humans have been doing certain things for thousands of years. The other day, I saw a comment on TikTok about the Drake and Kendrick Lamar rap beef that

said something along the lines of, “I love listening to men yell their poems to each other and seeing who has the best metaphor.” And I thought to myself, “Yes, exactly!” As silly as it sounds put that way, this is something that practitioners of orality, such as the ancient Greeks and Gauls, have been doing for thousands of years! The ability to see the ancient in the modern and the modern in the ancient is a wonderful and illuminating thing. Once you begin to understand ‘orality,’ you see it everywhere. From Black spirituals to the Grimms’ fairy tales to Appalachian folk tradition, there is orality everywhere for those with the eyes to see (or perhaps rather for those with the ears to hear).

The question is then, what do historians do with orality? Firstly, historians should attempt to disentangle themselves from the worship of the written word, both in everyday practice and in historical research. As important as writing is, it is not the end-all-be-all of knowledge. Memory and oratory (story-telling, public speaking, listening, etc.) are skills that need to be developed, muscles that need to be flexed. In terms of research, it must be understood that just because something is unwritten does not mean it is untrue, and conversely, that just because something is written does not make it *more* true. If a tree falls in the woods and no one writes about it, did it happen? Decidedly, yes.

Scholarship and education are (understandably) very literacy-centered. The downfall of this is that often researchers or historians covering oral societies and traditions do not have an understanding of what it means to be without writing, practically speaking. Now that we understand orality more, we can go back and apply this knowledge to other oral cultures. Rather than skipping over the Greek ‘Dark Age’ in history classes by saying ‘it was a terrible time and they lost writing completely,’ we can move past this third-grader response and use orality to understand the functioning of Bronze Age societies. From there, we might situate the

development of Greek myth and rhetoric in historical and cultural contexts. The same sentiment applies to the teaching of the Middle Ages. How might the medieval Irish epics relate to the Gallic oral tradition? Is there merit in attempting to find continuity?

Archaeology and the study of material culture might appear to be free of literary centrism, but the question becomes, "how do you examine something that leaves no trace, like speech, materially?" Again, understanding orality is key here. It is well attested that every known oral culture utilizes some form of mnemonics to recall their cultural knowledge. In some cultures, these mnemonic devices leave a trace. Lynne Kelly in her *Knowledge and Power in Prehistoric Societies* does something similar, examining sites and cultures such as Stonehenge and the Pueblo people through the lens of orality. Why couldn't the same be done for other oral societies? The claim that an object has possible 'mnemonic use' might be a step up from the label of 'ritual use' in understanding material culture. As academia and archaeology begin to understand orality—its features, abilities, and limitations—a whole new way of understanding the world, past and present, opens up.

In this study, I hope to have practiced what I preach. While this is a Greek and Roman Studies thesis, I have attempted to unobscure a people that the Greeks and Romans had both deliberately scorned, misrepresented, and colonized. To do so, I have utilized cross-cultural comparanda from other, similar marginalized groups. The most important notion I have tried to convey and keep in mind is that, at the end of the day, people are just people. Empathy transcends all, and we should never forget that.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Athenaeus VI 49, p. 246CD, in Tierney, "The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius."

Caesar. *The Gallic War, Book VI*. Translated by H. J. Edwards. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917. doi.org/10.4159/DLCL.caesar-gallic_wars.1917.

Cicero. *De Divinatione*. Translated by W. A. Falconer. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923. doi.org/10.4159/DLCL.marcus_tullius_cicero-de_divinatione.1923.

Diodorus Siculus. *The Library of History*. Translated by C. H. Oldfather. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933. doi.org/10.4159/DLCL.diodorus_siculus-library_history.1933.

Strabo. *Geography*. Translated by Horace Leonard Jones. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917. doi.org/10.4159/DLCL.strabo-geography.1917.

Tacitus. *Agricola*. Translated by M. Hutton, W. Peterson, R. M. Ogilvie, E. H. Warmington, and Michael Winterbottom. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914. doi.org/10.4159/DLCL.tacitus-agricola.1914.

Secondary Sources

Assmann, Aleida. "Transformations between History and Memory." *Social Research* 75, no. 1 (2008): 49–72.

Basu, Helene. "Practices of Praise and Social Constructions of Identity: The Bards of North-West India." *Archives de Sciences Sociales Des Religions* 50, no. 130 (2005): 81–105.

Bauer, Brigitte L.M. "Language Loss in Gaul: Socio-Historical and Linguistic Factors in Language Conflict." *Southwest Journal of Linguistics* 15 (1998): 23–44.

Bridgman, Timothy P. “Keltoi, Galatai, Galli: Were They All One People?” *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 24/25 (2004): 155–62.

Crumley, Carole L. *Celtic Social Structure: The Generation of Archaeologically Testable Hypotheses from Literary Evidence*. Ann Arbor, MI: U OF M MUSEUM ANTHRO ARCHAEOLOGY, 1974. doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11395573.

Dayter, Daria. “Orality and Literacy in Verbal Duelling: Playing the Dozens in the Twenty-First Century.” In *Contested Communities*, Vol. 190:23–49, 2017.

De Sousa Santos, Boaventura. “The Epistemologies of the South and the Future of the University.” *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, June 23, 2023, qhad038. doi.org/10.1093/jopedu/qhad038.

Dyson, Stephen L. “Caesar and the Natives.” *The Classical Journal* 63, no. 8 (1968): 341–46.

Fernández-Götz, Manuel. “Migrations in Iron Age Europe:” In *The Arras Culture of Eastern Yorkshire – Celebrating the Iron Age*, edited by Peter Halkon, 179–200. Proceedings of “Arras 200 – Celebrating the Iron Age." Royal Archaeological Institute Annual Conference. Oxbow Books, 2020. doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv138wskk.17.

Flower, Michael Attyah. “The Role and Image of the Seer.” In *The Seer in Ancient Greece*, 1st ed., 72–103. University of California Press, 2007. www.jstor.org.libproxy.vassar.edu/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pp4k4.9.

Freeman, Philip. *War, Women, and Druids: Eyewitness Reports and Early Accounts of the Ancient Celts*. 1st ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002.

Johnson-Sheehan, Richard, and Paul Lynch. “Rhetoric of Myth, Magic, and Conversion: A Prolegomena to Ancient Irish Rhetoric.” *Rhetoric Review* 26, no. 3 (2007): 233–52.

Johnstone, Christopher Lyle. “Singing the Muses’ Song.” In *Listening to the Logos*, 13–35. Speech and the Coming of Wisdom in Ancient Greece. University of South Carolina Press, 2009. doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv6wgcvz.7.

Kelly, Lynne. *Knowledge and Power in Prehistoric Societies: Orality, Memory, and the Transmission of Culture*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Lamar, Kendrick. *DNA*. produced by Mike WiLL Made-It. 2017. Warner Music Group, track 2 on *DAMN*.

Matasović, Ranko. *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Celtic*. Leiden Indo-European Etymological Dictionary Series, Volume 9. Leiden: Brill, 2009.

Nongbri, Brent *Before Religion*. Yale University Press, 2013. www.jstor.org.libproxy.vassar.edu/stable/j.ctt32bqx9.

Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy*. 2nd ed. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013.

Parks, Wards. *Verbal Dueling in Heroic Narrative: The Homeric and Old English Traditions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.

Peralta, Dan-el Padilla. "Epistemicide: The Roman Case." *Classica - Revista Brasileira de Estudos Clássicos* 33, no. 2 (December 31, 2020): 151–86. doi.org/10.24277/classica.v33i2.934.

Raaflaub, Kurt. "Caesar and Genocide: Confronting the Dark Side of Caesar's Gallic Wars." *New England Classical Journal* 48, no. 1 (May 14, 2021): 54–80. doi.org/10.52284/NECJ/48.1/article/raaflaub.

Scott, James C. "Orality, Writing, and Texts." In *The Art of Not Being Governed*, 220–37. An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia. Yale University Press, 2009. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1njkkx.10.

Smitherman, Geneva. *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*. Waynebook 51. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986.

Tierney, J. J. "The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius." *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature* 60 (1959): 189–275.

Webster, Jane. "At the End of the World: Druidic and Other Revitalization Movements in Post-Conquest Gaul and Britain." *Britannia* 30 (1999): 1–20. doi.org/10.2307/526671.

Wells, Peter S. *The Barbarians Speak: How the Conquered Peoples Shaped Roman Europe*. Princeton University Press, 2021. doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1j666ff.

Woolf, Greg. *Becoming Roman: The Origins of Provincial Civilization in Gaul*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

———. “Beyond Romans and Natives.” *World Archaeology*, Culture Contact and Colonialism, Vol. 28, no. No. 3 (February 1997): 339–50.