



# Polyaenus (*Strat.* 8.23.5) and Caesar's British Elephant

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## ABSTRACT

*Polyaenus (Strat. 8.23.5) includes an armoured elephant in his description of Julius Caesar crossing a defended ford in Britain (54 B.C.) – something found nowhere in Caesar's own Bellum Gallicum. From looking at a range of loci in the Strategica dealing with Caesar's military exploits in Celtic lands, it becomes clear that, instead of being the remnant of a now-lost source tradition, Polyaenus either based the elephant vignette on an underlying narrative structure provided by the Bellum Gallicum, or a source using this work very closely. Given the overall unlikelihood of Caesar taking an elephant to Britain, Polyaenus probably inserted an elephant for rhetorical and/or didactic purposes and was perhaps influenced by Caesar's own non-literary propaganda involving elephants.*

**Keywords:** Elephants; Britain; Caesar; *Bellum Gallicum*; Polyaenus; *Strategica*

## INTRODUCTION

One of the more curious anecdotes about Julius Caesar's military achievements is that preserved by Polyaenus in his *Strategica* (8.23.5).<sup>1</sup> At this *locus*, written in the late A.D. 150s or early 160s, we read that Caesar, in presumably his second expedition to Britain (54 B.C.), employed a single very large, turreted *and* armoured elephant to overcome the Britanni at an unnamed river crossing. Since Caesar himself makes no such claim in his *Bellum Gallicum*, Polyaenus' description is usually relegated to a brief aside in treatments of Caesar's campaigns, with the authors being somewhat uncertain what to do with this information, but feeling it must be included, or at least commented on, in the interests of narrative completeness.<sup>2</sup> For instance, Kistler refers to 'Caesar's second invasion of Britain in 54 B.C.' as the occasion when Caesar first employed a pachyderm.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Hawkes maintains the curious view that Caesar reported his use of the elephant 'clearing a river' in a dispatch to the Senate in 54 B.C., 'which Livy can afterwards have used, Polyaenus then [*sic*] Livy'. According

<sup>1</sup> In this study, we use *Strategica* instead of *Strategemata* as this now seems to be the most widely accepted title for Polyaenus' most significant work, as per the editions of Krentz and Wheeler (1994, see vi and xiii) and Brodersen (2017).

<sup>2</sup> Jennison (1937, 58) cited the *locus* as possible evidence 'of the government's Italian herd [of elephants]'.

<sup>3</sup> Kistler 2007, 161. Kistler (2007, 161–2) has taken the story particularly seriously, although he relied, fairly uncritically, on Stevens 1959, 626–7; see also Gowers 1947, 49.

to this line of thought, the incident eventually found its way into one source tradition, such as that supposedly stemming from Livy, whose account of the time period of interest to us has been lost.<sup>4</sup> Others, however, have ignored the tale entirely, presumably on the basis of its absence in Caesar's own work, or have at least cautioned us about taking the tale seriously.<sup>5</sup>

In any case, the *locus* has never been adequately explained, despite Reed's brief attempt to do so some years ago, his main aim being to cast doubt on the veracity of Roman sources dealing with the history of Britain, including Caesar, who supposedly decided to hide certain elements of his exploits for political reasons.<sup>6</sup> This relative lack of discussion on *Strat.* 8.23.5 is curious, given that an equally puzzling *locus* in Cassius Dio (60.21.2), which seemingly refers to the emperor Claudius using military elephants at the time of his British campaign of A.D. 43, has crept into a good many narratives of the Claudian invasion, especially those of a more 'popular' nature.<sup>7</sup> Some have even contended that *Strat.* 8.23.5 was a mistaken conflation of the two Roman expeditions to Britain, despite being some 90 years apart, since both Julius Caesar and Claudius could be called 'Caesar'.<sup>8</sup> A more frequent view, however, is that the two *loci* are entirely separate – a view recently demonstrated by Charles and Singleton in their discussion of Dio's tale of Claudian elephants in this journal.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the details provided by Polyaeus – as will be discussed herein – firmly anchor the vignette to Caesar's day, and so a different explanation, *pace* Reed, is required for this troublesome *locus*. In particular, limited attention has hitherto been paid to how and why it found its way into the *Strategica*, which, for the most part, refers to military incidents that can be corroborated in other sources, albeit often in an abbreviated fashion.<sup>10</sup>

#### POLYAENUS AND POSSIBLE SOURCES

Writing in the late second century A.D., Polyaeus, in Book 8 of his *Strategica*, presents 33 stratagems supposedly employed by Julius Caesar in his various campaigns. The stratagem of interest to us is one of the more detailed of these, and is worth presenting in full:

In Britain, Caesar was attempting to cross a great river. The king of the Britanni, Cassivellaunus (βασιλεὺς Βρεττανῶν Κασσιελλανός<sup>11</sup>), blocked him with numerous horsemen and chariots. In

<sup>4</sup> Hawkes 1977, 161, n. 2, with 161: 'It seems he had an elephant actually brought with him'.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Goldsworthy 2006, 285–92; Freeman 2008, 190ff. and esp. 195–6; Billows 2009, 148–9; Southern 2011, 33–47. But Edmondson (1992, 218) simply described the *locus* as 'unlikely', while Zecchini (1978, 204–5) expressed the view that one must be very sceptical about the matter.

<sup>6</sup> Reed (1980) devoted some space to the problem, but essentially reinforced the view of Stevens, and hypothesised, moreover, that Caesar dismissed his use of an elephant because he was embarrassed (1980, 24–5) by his failure to conquer Britain.

<sup>7</sup> Dio recorded that elephants *had been assembled* for Claudius' crossing over into Britain, but we are not told precisely that they were transported there, or what they did in Britain, despite their appearance in scholarly narratives of the event being relatively commonplace; see, e.g., Manley 2002, 55; Southern 2011, 70; De la Bédoyère 2013, 30; Hoffmann 2013, 66. It is not this article's intention to go into detail about this *locus*; that said, the precise logistics of the exercise remain puzzling, especially if Claudius only spent sixteen days in Britain; on this, see Cass. Dio 60.23.1, with Suet., *Claud.* 17.2. In another curious parallel to the *locus* of interest here, no other ancient author connected elephants to the Roman campaign in Britain in A.D. 43, and it may well be that Dio was mistaken in claiming that the animals had been assembled on the Channel, presumably at Gesoriacum (modern Boulogne-sur-Mer).

<sup>8</sup> For example, Charles 2008, 354–5, with n. 80, described this possibility in his brief treatment of the two *loci* in the broader context of the military equipment carried by ancient war elephants. Wightman (1975, 96) asked such a question out loud: 'has there been a gross muddle between Caesar and Claudius ...?'

<sup>9</sup> Charles and Singleton 2022, 173–84; see now also Woods 2023, 321–5.

<sup>10</sup> Seel (1960, 254–6), who rejected the notion of an elephant being present in Britain, made a brief effort to do this in the context of a larger treatment of Polyaeus' use of Pompeius Trogus and Caesar, but further nuance is required in the light of recent scholarship both on elephant warfare and on Polyaeus and his relationship to his sources.

<sup>11</sup> Compare Polyaeus' rather curious spelling of Cassivellaunus to that employed by Cassius Dio at 40.2.3: Κασσιελλανός.

Caesar's train was a very large elephant (μέγιστος ἑλέφανς), an animal unknown to the Britanni. Caesar armoured the elephant with iron scales (σιδηροῖς φολίσιν), raised a large tower (πύργον . . . . . μέγαν) on its back, set archers and slingers in the tower, and ordered the animal to step into the river. The Britanni, upon seeing the unknown and monstrous beast, panicked. Why must I mention their horses, when even among Greeks the horses take flight if they saw even an unarmoured elephant? But they did not even endure the sight of an armoured elephant carrying a tower (πυργοφόρον . . . . . καὶ ὀπλισμένον) and shooting missiles and slingstones. The Britanni fled with their horses and chariots, and the Romans crossed the river without danger after scaring off the enemy with a single beast.<sup>12</sup>

Now, no other extant source dealing with Caesar's military exploits, including Suetonius, Cassius Dio or Plutarch, who is generally regarded as having used Caesar's own writings, or even the much later Orosius, records Caesar having an elephant in Britain, or even in Gaul. Most tellingly of all, Caesar himself, who recounted his British expedition in considerable detail in the *Bellum Gallicum*, did not mention an elephant, a point made by Melber many years ago.<sup>13</sup> That said, there are a number of aspects of Polyaeus' description that, *prima facie* at least, seem to add a sense of verisimilitude to the *locus*. The first is the reference to Cassivellaunus, a historical figure attested by Caesar himself (see *BGall.* 5.11, 18–22). This detail clearly ties the temporal location of the passage to the mid-first century B.C., and makes the notion of a conflation with a use of elephants in Claudius' much later campaign quite problematic. That horses are afraid of war elephants is, of course, a *topos* that occurs widely in ancient military literature.<sup>14</sup> Yet Polyaeus also wrote specifically of chariots, which, as Caesar again tells us, were indeed in use among the Britons at the time of his expedition (see *BGall.* 4.33.2–3).

The equipment details pertaining to the elephant are also possible, for a statuette, now in the Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich, depicts a war elephant that is clearly equipped with scale armour.<sup>15</sup> Literary references to elephants wearing armour close to our time period are not plentiful, although Livy (37.40.4) mentions elephants at the battle of Magnesia (190 B.C.) wearing *frontalia*, presumably a type of protection for the elephant's head, together with *cristae* ('crests'). Turrets bearing missile-throwing men are, of course, commonly mentioned in the ancient military literature, such as Polybius' (5.84.2) description of the battle of Raphia (217 B.C.), where both the Seleucid Asian elephants and the Ptolemaic Africans were equipped with such structures.<sup>16</sup> Towers can also be seen in representational media. A well-known plate from Capena, now in the Museo Nazionale Etrusco, 'Villa Giulia', Rome, shows a turreted adult Asian elephant followed by its calf, perhaps an allusion to a story told about one of the war elephants of Pyrrhus at Beneventum in 275 B.C. (Flor. 1.13.12), whose unfortunate calf followed her into battle and was killed.<sup>17</sup> All of this suggests that Polyaeus need not have invented the details of the elephant's equipment by himself, if indeed the elephant is not

<sup>12</sup> Translation adapted from Krentz and Wheeler 1994, 2.759–61. Brodersen's edition (2017, 621) of Polyaeus offers no commentary on our problem.

<sup>13</sup> Melber 1885, 677.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., App., *Pun.* 7.43; Flor. 1.13.8; Livy 21.55.7, 30.18.7; Plut., *Pyrrh.* 17.3.

<sup>15</sup> The statuette, which clearly depicts an African elephant, shows scale armour on the beast's flanks. For an illustration, see Reinach 1892, 540, fig. 2625; Sekunda 1994, figs. 52 and 53. The statuette was once in the Collection J. Gréau. A terracotta statuette from Myrina on Lemnos (c. third century B.C.) now in the Louvre could show a war elephant wearing lamellar armour on its legs and neck; for an easily accessible illustration, see van Oppen de Ruiter 2019, fig. 15.

<sup>16</sup> On Raphia, see Charles 2007; 2016 *passim*; Schneider 2016, *passim*.

<sup>17</sup> For an easily accessible online illustration, see van Oppen de Ruiter 2019, fig. 8; see also De Visscher 1960, pl. 4; Goukowsky 1972, 491, fig. 8; Scullard 1974, pl. 7a. Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Ant. Rom.* 20.12.3 [19.14]) and Zonaras (8.6) also provide a broadly similar story.

historical, though it is difficult to associate the equipment described with any particular *locus* or artistic representation.

In short, there are aspects of *Strat.* 8.23.5 that – on the surface – appear to be quite realistic. But there are other aspects that do not ring true. The first landing of Caesar (55 B.C.) with only two legions on the Kentish coast seems ill-suited to the description of the war elephant, so let us dismiss that possibility. The second incursion (54 B.C.), with 628 ships, five legions and 2,000 cavalrymen and horses, was obviously much better planned and executed – but would Caesar really have sought an outsized elephant to accompany him in Britain? He did redesign the ships so that they could land cavalry more effectively than was the case in the first expedition (*BGall.* 5.1.2–3), but one wonders whether any redesign would have allowed a large elephant to disembark safely. Aelianus (*NA* 10.17) writes that elephants normally had to be transported by means of large cargo vessels (ναῦς φορτίδης = *naves onerariae*) and, because these could not venture close to the shore owing to their size, long gangways had to be provided, with branches arranged on each side to ‘trick’ the elephant into assuming that it was continuing its journey on land. To return to Caesar, it is important to recall that these were beach landings, with no kind of wharf being available, and that the ships were *designed* to be beached, as indeed they eventually were (*BGall.* 5.11.5–7). And even this second landing caused immense problems. Roman inexperience with tides and storms in the Channel meant that a large number of ships that had initially been kept at anchor became damaged when they crashed into each other and had to be repaired (*BGall.* 5.10.2–3, with 5.11.2–7).

There is also the question of where in the campaign the elephant would have figured. Happily, Caesar’s own work preserves an instance where a crossing was attempted of a large river, possibly the Thames, as Caesar himself calls the river in question (see *BGall.* 5.18.1–5).<sup>18</sup> According to Caesar’s own commentary, the ford was protected with sharpened stakes, both on the shore and in the water, with no elephant in sight. It is worth looking at this battle scene in full:

Having obtained knowledge of their plans, Caesar led his army into the borders of Cassivellaunus as far as the river Thames (*ad flumen Tamesim*), which can be crossed at one place only on foot, and that with difficulty. When he was come to that place, he remarked that, on the other bank of the river, a great force of the enemy (*magnas . . . copias hostium*) was drawn up. The bank was fortified with a fringe of sharp projecting stakes (*acutis sudibus praefixis*), and stakes of the same kind fixed underwater were concealed by the stream. When he had learnt these details from prisoners and deserters, Caesar sent the cavalry in advance (*praemisso equitatu*) and ordered the legions (*legiones*)<sup>19</sup> to follow up instantly. But the troops (*milites*) moved with such speed and such ardour (*ea celeritate atque eo impetu*), although they only had their heads above water, that the enemy could not withstand the assault of legions and cavalry (*impetum legionum atque equitum*), but abandoned the banks and committed themselves to flight.<sup>20</sup>

This passage is remarkably similar to *Strat.* 8.23.5, at least in terms of the narrative’s underlying structure, and is suggestive of a common historical thread. In both cases, Caesar a) wanted to cross a river at a deep ford with his army, but b) is opposed by Cassivellaunus and/or his forces, yet c) the Romans put the opposing force to flight, and then d) made the crossing safely.<sup>21</sup> The main difference, of course, between our two narratives is that Caesar wrote that it was not an elephant that caused Cassivellaunus’ men to flee, but the ‘speed’ (*celeritas*) and ‘ardour’

<sup>18</sup> Seel (1960, 250), building on earlier German scholarship, rightly connects this *locus* to Polyaeus, *Strat.* 8.23.5

<sup>19</sup> Caesar probably had four legions with him at this point, having left 10 cohorts with the ships; see Nolan 2018, 77. With so many men, upwards of 20,000 legionaries, plus cavalry, both Roman and allied, it is almost no wonder that the Britanni took to flight – an elephant would not have been needed to do the job.

<sup>20</sup> Translation adapted from Edwards 1917, 257.

<sup>21</sup> On the crossing of the Thames, see Nolan 2018, 71–5, who did not refer to an elephant being present.

(*impetus*) of Caesar's cavalry and legionaries. While there are no sharpened stakes in Polyaeus' story, which could be the result of the author dropping the stakes to add a greater degree of verisimilitude, since driving an elephant against such devices might be regarded as implausible, the inclusion of chariots suggests some basic underlying familiarity with the weapons of the Britanni—and it is worthwhile to note that Cassivellaunus' chariots are mentioned directly after the *locus* discussed above (*BGall.* 5.19.1). One is therefore left to choose between Caesar and Polyaeus, an eyewitness *versus* someone writing long after the fact, and not intending to write history in any case. Yet Hawkes, believing in the elephant tale and the historicity of Polyaeus' information, tries to have his cake and eat it too by claiming that the two *loci* are distinct, with the elephant tale, which was 'suppressed' by Caesar in the *Bellum Gallicum*, relating to the Medway rather than the Thames.<sup>22</sup> Once again, this seems like an effort to try to reconcile all the literary information that we have available and poses the question of why Caesar would not have used the elephant again at the Thames if it had been so successful at the Medway, even if it would have been less of a surprise to the defending Britons.<sup>23</sup>

Despite several commentators, such as Melber and Lammert (and Geus to some extent), being firmly against the idea that Polyaeus ever consulted Latin works such as Livy, much less the *Bellum Gallicum*,<sup>24</sup> it is possible to argue that Polyaeus was indeed familiar with Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum*, either through Caesar himself, or through other now-lost works using Caesar closely as a source. Indeed, a close inspection of the material presented relating to Caesar and to fighting the Celts and Germans in Book 8 of the *Strategica* reveals, for the most part, close structural similarities between the two works, as will be seen in a comparison of nine related *loci* directly below. Note, in particular, Zecchini's view that Dio *never* used Caesar for the composition of his history, which, if true, certainly points to one or more sources containing information about Caesar's martial exploits being in circulation.<sup>25</sup>

#### CAESAR IN GAUL: POLYAENUS AND THE *BELLUM GALLICUM* COMPARED

Other *loci* dealing with what appear to be parallel incidents in the Gallic Wars, i.e. from *Strat.* 8.23.2 up to and including *Strat.* 8.23.11, do show some divergence between what Polyaeus records and Caesar wrote in his *Bellum Gallicum*, although there are also occasions where the

<sup>22</sup> Hawkes 1977, 170 n. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Admittedly, Hawkes (1977, 170 n. 3) makes mentions of the stakes, both above and below water, protecting the ford of the Thames, and wonders if this stopped Caesar using his elephant: 'did the Britons know this elephant already'? But one would imagine that an armoured elephant would have had a better chance against stakes than the unprotected cavalry (and *militēs*) that Caesar *did* use to cross the ford.

<sup>24</sup> Melber (1885, 681–8), rejecting the possibility of Asinius Pollio, assumed that the source could only be one writing in Greek, such as possibly Nicolaus of Damascus ('immerhin möglich', 688). Lammert (1952, 1434) held that Polyaeus' descriptions of Caesar's exploits do not come from the general's own writings: 'Wichtig sind die Nachrichten über Cäsar VII 23, weil sie nicht aus Cäsars eigenen Schriften stamen'. See also Schettino 1998, 188, who argues that, of Latin authors, we can only be sure that Polyaeus used Suetonius, with Plutarch often filling the gap for 'gli episodi connessi con la storia romana'. There is an interesting parallel, here, with earlier scholarship on Appian and the *Civil Wars*, where it is supposed that his source/s were probably Greek. But Appian (and indeed Polyaeus somewhat later) spent time at Rome as an advocate, and so his supposed lack of familiarity with Latin (and works in Latin) probably demands some rethinking; on this, see Stevenson 2015, 269–71. Plutarch is another Greek author who might be included in the wider field described by this debate, even though he admitted that he only learned Latin later in life (Plut., *Dem.* 2.2–3). Cf. Schettino 1998, 189; and Geus 2010, 58, who affirms that Polyaeus 'kaum Kenntnis der lateinischen Sprache zeigt', and contends that Latin literature would have been hard to come by in his native Macedonia. Geus (2010, 68) concludes that Polyaeus was not active as a speaker at Rome, and mainly worked in a Grecophone setting.

<sup>25</sup> Zecchini 1978, 106: 'La versione di Dione è . . . del tutto indipendente da quella di Cesare'. He imagines that someone like Q. Aelius Tubero must be Dio's underlying source.

two versions are remarkably similar, at least with respect to their basic underlying structure. In such cases, Polyaeus could possibly have consulted the *Bellum Gallicum* directly, or at least a text very closely following Caesar's basic narrative – where such a text existed, of course. To shed further light on such possibilities, there are nine parallel *loci* dealing with the Gallic War that are worth reviewing in detail.

1) *STRAT.* 8.23.2 *VS BGALL.* 1.10

In these *loci*, both authors deal with Caesar responding to the threat posed by the warlike Helvetii. The response involved quickly moving as many troops as Caesar could muster over the Alps to where they could be deployed. Here, there is quite a substantial difference between the accounts, since Caesar does not mention a mist or fog obscuring the movement of his troops across the Alps. Caesar's account is largely descriptive and provided in the broad-brush strokes of ablative absolutes, but Polyaeus, always interested in the stratagem, that is, how Caesar managed to move his troops into position for the impending campaign, records a detail that Caesar neglects. While Caesar refers to the Ceutrones, the Graioceli and the Carturiges trying to stop his traversing army by 'seizing points on the higher ground' (*locis superioribus occupatis*), his troops managed to drive them off (*compluribus his proeliis pulsis*). In a similar manner to *Strat.* 8.23.5, it is not the Roman army that does the bulk of the work, but another factor, this being a fog (ὄμίχλη), a detail which clearly does not derive from the *Bellum Gallicum*.

2) *STRAT.* 8.23.3 *VS BGALL.* 1.12

These *loci* are broadly similar at first glance, but close inspection reveals startling differences. For a start, Polyaeus has the Helvetii crossing the Rhône instead of the Arar (Saône), something which seems *prima facie* to preclude that Polyaeus used Caesar directly for this detail.<sup>26</sup> Polyaeus records that the Helvetii were 80,000 strong, with 20,000 fighting men, while Caesar only provides figures, based on Celtic records, much later at *BGall.* 1.29, a total of 368,000 persons including the Helvetii and their allies, and a total of 92,000 combatants.<sup>27</sup> But, for our purposes, the most significant divergence is that Polyaeus writes that Caesar feigned weakness on the first day of the encounter, which caused the Helvetii to become over-confident by crossing the river *en masse* to confront the Romans, which prompted Caesar to attack these men, tired from the crossing, with full force at night. Caesar, however, provides a rather different account. Here, Caesar waits until only a quarter of the Helvetii had not crossed, and proceeded to attack these men 'unawares' (*inopinantes*), encumbered by their full gear (*impeditos*), with three legions. So, we have rather different information about which group of Helvetii crossed the river. In Polyaeus' account, the Helvetii who *had not yet crossed* are slaughtered, whereas, in the *Bellum Gallicum*, the Helvetii who are slaughtered are those who *cross the river* to fight Caesar. In short, the message is very different: Polyaeus' version describes the benefits of feigning weakness, while Caesar's alludes to taking apart an enemy army bit by bit, but the notion of Helvetii crossing a river remains the central thread.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Caesar mentions the name of the river twice in *BGall.* 1.12, and again at the beginning of 1.13.

<sup>27</sup> Note that Plutarch (*Caes.* 18.1–2) provides the overall figure of 300,000 Helvetii and their allies, with the number of fighting men being 190,000. One might well compare App., *Celt.* 15, an epitome of Appian's now-lost Gallic history, which records 200,000 fighting men, and Cass. Dio 38.32.4, where no numbers are given.

<sup>28</sup> Plutarch (*Caes.* 18.2) says it was Labenius, not Caesar, who crushed the enemy at the Arar, with these being the Tigrini rather than the Helvetii.

## 3) STRAT. 8.23.4 VS BGALL. 1.50–3

According to Polyaeus, Caesar exploited the Germans' reluctance to conduct any fighting before the new moon (πρὸ νέας σελήνης) because their seers (μόνταις) had warned them against it. Once Caesar found out about such reticence, he quickly attacked the Germans who, being perturbed with the idea of fighting at this inauspicious time, were soundly defeated. This information is clearly derived in some way from Caesar, although the precise details differ. For example, it seems that Ariovistus, the German commander, had the opportunity to press home his advantage against Caesar but failed to do so because the German matrons, who used 'lots' (*sortes*) to divine the future, had declared that they should not be victorious 'before the new moon' (*ante novam lunam*). Nonetheless, Caesar compelled the Germans to fight him. Admittedly, Frontinus (Strat. 2.1.16), Plutarch (*Caes.* 19.3–5) and Cassius Dio (38.48–50) provide similar details, but there is nothing to suggest that Caesar, or an author closely following him, was not the underpinning source.<sup>29</sup>

## 4) STRAT. 8.23.6 VS BGALL. 5.48

Polyaeus writes that Caesar promised aid to his besieged commander Quintus Cicero, who was by that stage contemplating surrender to the besieging Gauls, by having a light javelin or dart with a message attached thrown at the tower of his camp by an allied Gallic horseman. The message promised that Cicero would soon be relieved, and that he should hold fast. This represents a very close approximation of *BGall.* 5.48, the main differences being a) the precise technical language that Caesar (*tragula*) and Polyaeus (λόγχη) use for the weapon in question; b) that the message was written in Greek characters as a kind of code in the *Bellum Gallicum*; and c) that, in Caesar's version, the message is not noticed for two days.<sup>30</sup> In both cases, however, Caesar's approach is made clear to Cicero's men on account of smoke (*fumi incendiorum* = καπνός) being seen in the distance. Whatever the case, there is clearly a relationship between the two *loci*, although Polyaeus simplifies the narrative to its raw essence of Caesar cunningly getting a message through to Cicero despite the odds.

## 5) STRAT. 8.23.7 VS BGALL. 5.49–51

Once again, these *loci* are broadly comparable in their basic narrative concept, but closer inspection reveals differences. In Polyaeus, Caesar tricks the Gauls to attack a fortified camp (witness χάρακα) built on a confined parcel of land by concealing elements of his force in the wooded areas above the camp, where he also placed himself. Overconfident, the Gauls attack the camp after the Romans initially skirmish with them on horseback, but soon withdraw, feigning a lack of stomach for the fight. The Gauls follow Caesar's horsemen back to the trenches of the camp, try to fill in the ditch, and even attempt to pull down the camp's palisade. Then a signal is sounded and foot soldiers pour out of the camp, while the concealed troops rush down from the hill and attack the enemy's rear, causing the Gauls to be confronted on all sides. Caesar's version retains the core elements of the story, such as the cavalry skirmish before the camp, tearing down the palisade (*vallum*) and filling in the trenches (*fossas*), but adds elements such as reinforcing the camp's defence works – presumably over

<sup>29</sup> Wheeler (2010, 23) contended that Polyaeus possibly avoided consulting Frontinus given that Frontinus, a distant relative of Marcus Aurelius, had already dealt with post-Augustan military stratagems.

<sup>30</sup> The main difference is that the *tragula* is launched with an *amentum*, a kind of throwing loop made of leather; see also Cass. Dio 40.9.1–4, where the more generic ἀκόντιον is found.

and above the normal standard – to make it look as though the Romans were fearful. Yet, most importantly, he does not describe hiding a good portion of his army in a bushy area on a hill so that he could make his encampment very small.<sup>31</sup> In short, much of the sequence of events remains the same, but there is no hint of Caesar and some of his army posting themselves on a hill and rushing down upon the Gauls.

6) *STRAT.* 8.23.8 *VS BGALL.* 7.27, WITH 7.28

In Polyaeus' very brief account, Caesar was attacking a Gallic fort when it started to rain very heavily indeed. The storm forced the defending Gauls from the battlements but Caesar, taking this opportunity, ordered his soldiers to climb the undefended walls, and so took the fort. Caesar makes slightly less of the weather, and the battlements were not completely bereft of enemy soldiers, although they were 'less carefully posted than usual' (*quod paulo incautius custodias in muro dispositas videbat*), for Caesar describes his troops forcing the shocked defenders from the walls at *BGall.* 7.28. Caesar then goes on to describe the subsequent slaughter of the enemy in detail,<sup>32</sup> something which does not concern Polyaeus, whose main interest is simply the stratagem of using the weather to one's advantage to surprise the enemy. In this sense, the other details are not material.

7) *STRAT.* 8.23.9 *VS BGALL.* 7.35

These *loci* are extremely similar. In fact, they are virtually *identical* to each other, with both authors providing exacting detail about how a bridge was destroyed by Vercingetorix, and then rebuilt by Caesar's men on the piles left behind – an undertaking which allowed the Roman forces to surprise the enemy by crossing the river. This very high level of similarity certainly suggests at least the existence of a work, regardless of the Latin or Greek heritage of its author, that was very much indebted to Caesar. That said, there is one substantial difference: in Polyaeus, the Romans, after crossing on the reconstructed bridge, fight the Gauls immediately, while a clash between Gauls and Romans does not take place in the *Bellum Gallicum* until five days had passed. Once again, Polyaeus' eye is firmly on the stratagem being recalled, not in capturing precisely what happened, for the stratagem's impact is strengthened by Caesar surprising the Gauls and gaining an immediate victory.

8) *STRAT.* 8.23.10 *VS BGALL.* 7.45

Again, these *loci* are broadly similar, and Polyaeus more or less follows the basic narrative structure of *BGall.* 7.45, which describes moving soldiers quietly from one place to another to avoid enemy detection at the siege of Gergovia (52 B.C.), but he adds details not found elsewhere. These include: a) the Romans using shorter-than-usual javelins and swords to avoid entangling themselves in the undergrowth (as is indicated by ἀκόντια βραχέα καὶ ξιφίδια σύμμετρα, ὅπως τὰς χαμαιπετεῖς ὕλας μὴ ὑπερέχειεν); and b) the Roman soldiers crouching instead of walking upright when they successfully stole across a forested hill beneath the noses of the enemy Gauls. As with the anecdotes discussed above, Polyaeus is keen to deal with the importance of the element of surprise, with the short weapons adding to Caesar's ruse.

<sup>31</sup> Much of Caesar's account is broadly similar to the very abbreviated Frontin., *Str.* 3.17.6; cf. Cass. Dio 40.10.2–3 (very close to Caesar's version).

<sup>32</sup> cf. Cass. Dio 40.34.3–4.



9) *STRAT.* 8.23.11 *VS BGALL.* 7.77–88, AND ESPECIALLY *BGALL.* 7.88

This, the last of Polyaeus' Gallic War stratagems must be regarded as something of an outlier. Here, it is difficult to draw a direct comparison between Polyaeus and the *Bellum Gallicum*, given that Polyaeus' version of the siege of Alesia is very compact compared to the much more detailed narrative of Caesar, which includes a purported speech of the Gallic leader Vercingetorix. That said, at *BGall.* 7.88, we read of the Roman cavalry and other cohorts (*cohorts aliae*) suddenly attacking the Gauls in the rear after the main pitched battle had commenced (note the use of *repente post tergum equitatus cernitur*), an action which cut the Gauls off from any organised retreat, and thus resulted in their capitulation. Polyaeus' main interest is to acknowledge Caesar's foresight with respect to detaching a portion of his army to attack the enemy from an unexpected angle. The main difference is that, in Caesar's account, the battle had already begun by the time the cavalry attacked from the rear, whereas in Polyaeus' version, it was the cavalry attack that got the battle under way.

Of course, an inspection of all these Caesarian *loci* dealing with his operations in Gaul and Britain reveals nothing quite as intrusive or divergent as a giant armoured elephant, but we have seen that there are indeed instances where Polyaeus appears to adapt a vignette from Caesar – or someone closely following Caesar – to suit his own ends; that is, conveying a stratagem. An important observation is that, while Polyaeus' versions of events are shorter, unsurprising given the nature of his work, they nonetheless add different elements over and above what Caesar provides. These elements, however, are rarely of a random nature, but generally serve to reinforce the core stratagem at the heart of the *locus* in question. Thus we see, as in the armoured elephant stratagem, that Polyaeus is not really concerned with historical accuracy or even 'doing history'; rather, the shell of the narrative that Caesar provides, either found in the *Bellum Gallicum* or something that is reasonably true to this source, is an armature on which to hang narrative accoutrements that will serve the intent of the stratagem being conveyed to the reader.

It seems entirely possible, then, despite the aforementioned views of Melber and Lammert, that Polyaeus *did* know of the story told at *BGall.* 5.18, either directly through his own reading of the *Bellum Gallicum*, or through another version of it that has now been lost, with this text having been written in either Greek or Latin. Into that genuinely Caesarian narrative matrix, regardless of its precise origin, Polyaeus might well have thrown an elephant, together with details concerning the effect that these beasts can have on horses, into what is a fairly standard celebration of Roman military enthusiasm on Caesar's part. Indeed, this brief analysis provides further cause to question Martín García's conclusion that 80 per cent of Polyaeus' anecdotes come from earlier collections of stratagems – a concern which Wheeler has already raised.<sup>33</sup> What is more, if we maintain the old scholarly view that Polyaeus did not consult Caesar directly, Seel's view that Polyaeus attributed tricks to Caesar that he had found in other sources – a so-called process of *Motivübertragung* – emerges as a distinct possibility, with his view that a Greek source influenced the rather trite statement about horses fearing elephants probably being accurate.<sup>34</sup> In any case, it is clear that Polyaeus was already familiar with the *topos* of horses fearing elephants: at *Strat.* 4.12, we read that Perseus, the last king of Macedonia, taught his cavalry not to fear the elephants in Rome's army by making wooden models of the beasts of appropriate size and colour, with a trumpeter located inside to imitate

<sup>33</sup> Martín García 1980, 1167, 1170, with Wheeler 2010, 38: '[the] figure of 80% ... seems based on false premises'.

<sup>34</sup> Seel 1960, 249–70, and especially 254–5. Cf. Lammert 1952. 1434, who, oddly enough given the information assembled here, was of the view that Polyaeus never used Latin sources, except perhaps for Suetonius' lives of Caesar and Augustus, even though he contended that this possibility is 'unwahrscheinlich'. See also Schettino 1998, 188: 'l'unico autore latino identificabile con certezza è Svetonio'.

the elephant's trumpeting.<sup>35</sup> Thus it seems likely that Polyaeus, a literary trickster who was actually writing about tricks, was wont to weave together a multiplicity of sources of various types and origins, as Pretzler has pointed out.<sup>36</sup>

#### CAESAR AND ELEPHANTS: JOINING THE DOTS

It remains, of course, to ask why Polyaeus would have Caesar bring an elephant to Britain in the first place, and why he became so associated with elephants after his death. Perhaps the association had something to do with Caesar's name itself, with the legend, at least according to the hardly reliable *Historia Augusta* (*Ael.* 2.3), being that a Julian ancestor had once killed an elephant in battle, an animal supposedly referred to as *caesai* in a North African tongue.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, the Romans of the Late Republic generally did not favour the war elephant and Caesar, in around 55–54 B.C., was presumably lacking in any military experience with elephants – even if one might assume that he was familiar with their appearance in *venationes*, or similar displays in the ring. Caesar *did* encounter war elephants much later in his campaign against Metellus Scipio and Juba I in North Africa, leading up to the battle of Thapsus in 46 B.C.<sup>38</sup> Although these Numidian elephants reportedly did not have too much impact on the Roman forces in any of these encounters, Terry and Upton, extrapolating from a *locus* in Cicero's *Philippics*, opined that Caesar intended to make use of elephants in his projected war against Parthia,<sup>39</sup> an action which would never come to pass on account of Caesar's assassination in 44 B.C. If Caesar had indeed thought of using elephants against Parthian forces, it would add to the view that he did not completely discount the elephant's military value. Yet it is difficult to suggest, from the aforementioned Ciceronian *locus* alone, that Caesar had an elephant with him in Britain in 54 B.C. The argument that the elephant was there for psychological purposes, that is, to terrify an enemy who had never seen such beasts, holds little water, for elephants could have had more or less the same effect in many of Caesar's Gallic campaigns.

Moreover, if there is any historical basis at all to the armoured elephant, it is puzzling why Caesar does not make mention of his landing of an elephant in Britain and his utilisation of the beast in the *Bellum Gallicum* – an important purpose of which was to aggrandise his feats.<sup>40</sup> Surely being the first person to lead a war elephant to Britain might have rated a few lines. Gowers asserted that Caesar chose to 'give the whole of the credit to his legionaries rather than

<sup>35</sup> This action was intended to offset the elephants in the Roman army of the time, which reportedly had some African beasts as well as those from India. Whatever Perseus did, it was not enough to stop the Roman victory at Pydna (168 B.C.), where their elephants – somewhat surprisingly – contributed to the Roman cause. Some African elephants were provided by the Numidian ruler Masinissa (Livy 42.62.2, 43.6.13), while the Indian elephants came from Antiochus IV.

<sup>36</sup> Pretzler 2010, 92. Pretzler (92–3) adds the tantalising possibility that Polyaeus also might have incorporated oral traditions into his work. He also suggests that some vignettes might be the product of memory, while remembered (or rather mis-remembered) information, albeit based on a literary source, might have also crept into vignettes. Less plausible is his suggestion that the (highly unlikely) Claudian association of elephants and Britain might have had some influence. These are interesting points to consider with respect to our elephant vignette.

<sup>37</sup> The *Historia Augusta*, however, provides other possibilities for the name at the same *locus*; cf. Plin., *HN* 7.47.

<sup>38</sup> On elephants at Thapsus, see *BAfr.* 83.1–4, with Cass. Dio 43.8.1–43.9.1 and App., *BCiv.* 2.96–7, with Charles and Rhodan 2008, 177–88; Kistler 2007, 162–3. There were also earlier confrontations in the same campaign: see *BAfr.* 30.2 and 41.2–3.

<sup>39</sup> See Terry and Upton 1969, 77: 'probably'. This unproven – and unprovable – assertion stems from Cicero (*Phil.* 5.46), who wrote that Octavian, in the aftermath of Caesar's assassination, mustered 'cavalry, archers and elephants' (*equites, sagittarii, elephanti*). On the projected Parthian campaign, see App., *BCiv.* 3.77; Cass. Dio 45.3.1; Plut., *Caes.* 58.3.

<sup>40</sup> This point is also made by Charles 2008, 354. Recent treatments of 'propaganda' and self-presentation in the *Bellum Gallicum* include Krebs 2017 and Batstone 2017; cf. Jervis 2018, 236–40.

to admit that he had made the task comparatively easy for them by scaring the simple savages out of their wits', but this explanation does not quite ring true.<sup>41</sup> Roman writers often remarked on victories being achieved with minimal Roman citizen losses, or through the employment of auxiliary troops, possibly the most famous being Tacitus' (*Agr.* 35.2) description of Agricola's victory at Mons Graupius (A.D. 83 or 84), where victory was supposedly achieved 'without Roman blood' (*citra Romanum sanguinem*).<sup>42</sup> Achieving a victory without the need to engage Roman citizen soldiers was just the sort of thing Caesar would be likely to report to his Italian audience – a triumph of his ingenuity and tactical nous.<sup>43</sup> Stevens, however, contended that Caesar chose *not* to mention the elephant because Domitius Ahenobarbus, grandfather of one of his political rivals in the mid 50s B.C., rode on an elephant's back after his victory against the Transalpine Gauls (Suet., *Ner.* 2.1–2), whereas, because Caesar did not conquer Britain, such an action would have made Caesar look foolish.<sup>44</sup>

All this suggests special pleading, as does the contention, also advanced by Stevens, that a certain coin type of Caesar (= *RRC* 443/1) showing an (unarmoured and turretless) African elephant on the obverse crushing a snake or dragon – assumed by Stevens to be a symbol of 'Ocean' – recalls the armoured elephant in question.<sup>45</sup> The coin, often referred to in Caesarian studies as 'the elephant *denarius*', cannot be dated precisely, but most likely dates from the mid 40s B.C., or perhaps more precisely from 49 B.C. according to Nousek's comprehensive study of this coin type.<sup>46</sup> Connecting it to the British campaign seems the most unlikely of all the options available.<sup>47</sup> Nousek has argued that the coin type in question is a Caesarian appropriation of a traditional emblem employed by various political rivals.<sup>48</sup> In particular, the elephant was associated with the Metelli, the Ahenobarbi, and Pompey the Great, with the snake possibly alluding to tales of the ongoing struggle between elephant and serpent found in sources such as Pliny the Elder (*HN* 8.33) and Lucan (9.727–33).<sup>49</sup>

Overall, the elephant tale conveyed at *Strat.* 8.23.5 is indeed unpersuasive in historical or military terms, with a turreted and armoured war elephant seemingly having been stretched over the armature of an actual river crossing recorded by Caesar in his own work, or a later version of that incident. It remains to be asked: what was Polyaeus attempting to do at this *locus*? Polyaeus' *Strategica* was not intended as a history, but rather presents brief historical accounts that are illustrative of particular stratagems, although some sections seem to have more of the flavour of 'interesting anecdotes' than actual military ruses. Polyaeus was, according to the much later Suda, a rhetorician, so whatever he writes must presumably be taken *cum grano*

<sup>41</sup> Gowers 1947, 49.

<sup>42</sup> On such matters, see Hassall 2000, 332. One might also note the preponderance of auxiliary troops in battle on Trajan's Column compared to citizen soldiers.

<sup>43</sup> Wiseman 1998 has argued for serial publication of Caesar's work, partly because Caesar wanted his exploits constantly in the minds of the people of Rome and Italy while he was away. Indeed, the *Commentarii* would probably have been read out in public places, hence the use of the third-person 'Caesar' in Caesar's writings.

<sup>44</sup> Stevens 1959, 626–7. Scullard (1974, 194) summarily dismissed Stevens' approach to the matter: 'seems rather far-fetched'. Charles (2008, 354) is of a similar view.

<sup>45</sup> Stevens 1959, 626–7.

<sup>46</sup> Nousek 2008, 290; similarly Crawford at *RRC* 443/1: '49 B.C.–48 B.C.' Cf. Sydenham 1952, 167, n. 1006, who dated it to c. 54–51 B.C.

<sup>47</sup> For a contrary view, see Levick 1978, 100; Wightman 1975, 96.

<sup>48</sup> Nousek 2008, 305. Cf. Kistler 2007, 161: 'Caesar's second invasion of Britain in 54 B.C., where he first employed a pachyderm'; and Gowers 1947, 49.

<sup>49</sup> Grueber (1910, 390–1) suggested that the snake represents the *carnyx* war trumpets used by Celtic soldiers, with the coin, in his opinion, thus depicting Caesar's conquest of Gaul. Yet the *carnyx* (which could often have boar heads) certainly need not be associated exclusively with Britain, as it was found in various Celtic armies over a long period of time; see Caes., *BGall.* 7.81.3 (*tuba*), 8.20.2 (*tuba*); Diod. Sic. 5.30.3 (σάλπιγξ); Polyb. 2.29.6–7 (σάλπιγξ). It is also well attested on a variety of coins and other three-dimensional media. Even Reed (1980, 26), whose general thoughts on the coin in question and Polyaeus are problematic, dismissed the idea of the serpent being a *carnyx*.

*salis*.<sup>50</sup> In any case, the rhetor Polyaeus could, as Krentz and Wheeler pointed out as an overall observation of the technique employed in the *Strategica*, be ‘adapt[ing] an historical *exemplum* to suit his own purposes’.<sup>51</sup> This is also more or less the view of Zecchini, but where our assessment differs is that he sees ‘tali varianti’ as being ‘prive di fondamento storico’ and thus complete fabrications on the part of Polyaeus. In contrast, we have argued that such episodes, which ostensibly have no connection to what other sources tell us – like the appearance of an elephant in Britain crossing a deep, protected ford – are *based* on some sort of underlying vignette, be that either in Caesar or a work following Caesar.<sup>52</sup>

In this case, therefore, the very idea of using an armoured elephant of immense size bearing a tower to scare an enemy was deemed by Polyaeus to be more important than whoever used it. By extension, the target and indeed veracity of such an action was also deemed to be of lesser importance compared to the overall didactic message.<sup>53</sup> While Caesar, at *BGall.* 5.18, largely attempted to extol the morale of his troops, this being a product of his own charismatic leadership, Polyaeus seems to have used an existing Caesarian narrative as a vehicle to point out something that he felt was necessary to convey to his readers. Such a message might simply be that enemy soldiers can be terrified by that which is unfamiliar to them – which makes our vignette a useful *exemplum* for any aspiring general, or indeed any rhetor looking for colour in his work, with Wheeler noting that ‘a military treatise [such as the *Strategica*], not a rhetorical manual, was the proper place to discuss stratagems’.<sup>54</sup>

Moreover, Caesar was to become quite closely associated with elephants, not only on the aforementioned coinage, but also in propagandistic displays held at Rome. For example, there is the story of 40 torch-carrying elephants forming a colonnade through which Caesar passed during his triumph in 46 B.C. (Cass. Dio 43.22.1; Suet., *Iul.* 37.2), together with (presumably the same) 40 elephants taking part in a mock battle in the Circus in the same year (App., *BCiv.* 2.102; Cass. Dio 43.23.3; Plin., *HN* 8.22; Suet., *Iul.* 39).<sup>55</sup> One might immediately presume that these animals had been captured in the wake of Thapsus – Caesar’s ‘elephant battle’ – although this is doubted by Jennison, who has argued that those animals were insufficiently trained for use in displays.<sup>56</sup> Whatever the case, stories might have circulated that Caesar not only used elephants in triumphal displays, but also used at least one of them in the field to terrify an enemy. Therefore, there might well have been a broader association of Caesar with the elephant in antiquity, particularly in the decades after his death. This seems the best way to explain what Polyaeus presents at *Strat.* 8.23.5. Of course, the use of elephants in triumphs, and in a games setting, is very different from the use of elephants in a Roman military setting in the age of Caesar. But Polyaeus, in light of the other apparent fabrications that we have witnessed pertaining to Caesar’s Gallic campaigning, might indeed have performed the leap of imagination necessary for the appearance of an armoured elephant in his *Strategica*. In short, that which might well have been purely ideological in its inspiration, e.g., the appearance of elephants on Caesarian coinage or the appearance of such beasts in Caesar’s triumphs, was lifted and placed onto the pages of the (ostensibly) historical.

<sup>50</sup> *Suda* π 1955, Πολύαινος.

<sup>51</sup> Krentz and Wheeler 1994, xvi; see also Seel 1960, 255, who emphasise the stylistic differences between the underlying Caesarian tale (‘Caesars kühler und scharfer Sachlichkeit’) compared to Polyaeus’ rather more florid embellishments.

<sup>52</sup> Zecchini 1978, 205.

<sup>53</sup> Wheeler (2010, 20, with 30) emphasises the essentially didactic nature of works such as the *Strategica*.

<sup>54</sup> Wheeler 2010, 21.

<sup>55</sup> See also App., *BCiv.* 2.102; Suet., *Iul.* 30.3; and cf. Plin., *HN* 8.22.

<sup>56</sup> Jennison 1937, 58. Recall that Florus (2.13.67) described Juba’s elephants as ‘unaccustomed to war and only recently brought from the woods’ (*bellorum rudes et nuperi a silva*).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In sum, Polyaeus' reference to an elephant of Caesar in Britain remains a tale to be treated with caution. It follows that there is no need to divine some sort of now-lost source tradition to support the *locus*, such as the now-lost books of Livy that might have captured information that Caesar had dispatched to the Senate, but did not appear in his own published writings. Importantly, the *locus* serves as a reminder of the difficulty of constructing overarching narratives from various sources of unequal verisimilitude, and with differing literary intents. Simply put, inserting an armoured and turreted elephant into any broader narrative of Caesar's operations in Britain – especially the fording of a river – would appear to be unwise when Caesar, a man not shy of associating himself with elephant imagery, as we have seen with his coinage and spectacles, wrote absolutely nothing of the sort. Regardless of whether Polyaeus ever read the *Bellum Gallicum* or relied on a source that closely reflected Caesar's writings, be that a source written in Greek or Latin, our analysis of *Strat.* 8.23.5 suggests that he was not averse to hanging a military lesson on a narrative hook that had very little to do with the message being told. This analysis therefore allows us a clearer insight into Polyaeus' way of working, and emphasises that his overall goals are generally far from historical. Rather, we have seen, particularly in our comparison of Caesar's words and the corresponding stratagems of Polyaeus, that Polyaeus was wont to add in extra detail not recorded elsewhere, or change elements of the chronology in order to serve his prime intent. To conclude, Wheeler's observation regarding 'stratagemic doctrine' is particularly apposite in this case: 'The trick's the thing, not the historical details'.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Wheeler 2010, 30.

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