

Last stand for the Gauls, on a hill in Burgundy

Above the village of Alise-Ste-Reine, northwest of Dijon, a 19th-century bronze statue depicts the first and last leader of a united Gaul. Vercingétorix inherited the chieftaincy of the Arvernus (whence Auvergne) at an early age and other tribes soon recognised his prowess. Overcoming differences, they rallied behind him as their leader against Rome.

The young general was reluctant to meet the Romans in pitched battle, though he had numerical superiority in Gaul. His preferred tactics—cutting supply lines, and a scorched earth policy—met with some success but the Gaulish alliance was fragile and he found it difficult to co-ordinate such attacks. When a surprise strike on the Roman army marching through Burgundy failed, Julius Caesar surrounded the Gauls at Alésia (now Alise-Ste-Reine), a fortified plateau, one mile long and with very steep slopes. Vercingétorix had already seen the Romans off after a similar siege in the Massif Central and probably believed he could do it again—but Caesar, ever mindful of his reputation in Rome, needed victory at all costs. He encircled the entire plateau with an unprecedented double line of

trenches and walls, protected by wooden stakes—a huge undertaking even for his 55,000 troops. The outer defences, with a circumference of 14 miles, faced outwards to prevent reinforcements from relieving the stronghold—not that it prevented them from trying. Before long, according to Caesar's estimate, a quarter of a million Gaulish infantry and cavalrymen had arrived in support. Undaunted, Caesar fought alongside his troops and held both fronts, but it was six weeks before Vercingétorix, his army faced with starvation, surrendered.

Wearing the golden panoply of the chieftain, Vercingétorix rode out to Caesar, dismounted, disarmed and knelt before him. He was taken to Rome in chains and imprisoned for six years, before being paraded through the streets on Caesar's official 'triumph of Gaul' in 46BC. Having portrayed Vercingétorix as a redoubtable adversary in his memoirs, Caesar was not always generous in victory: he had his prisoner ritually strangled at the foot of the Capitol soon after the parade—hardly a fitting end for a brave, talented general who could have proved a useful ally to Caesar in his bid to assume control of the whole of the Mediterranean world.

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