Caesar and the Bellum Alexandrinum: An Analysis of Style, Narrative Technique, and the Reception of Greek Historiography

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Abstract

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*Caesar and the Bellum Alexandrinum* is a welcome study of an important historical text whose origin was a puzzle already in antiquity. Past attention to this narrative of the civil war campaigns in 48 and 47 BCE between the death of Pompey and the victory over Pharomaces concentrated on the vexed question of authorship: Hirtius? Oppius? several hands? none of the above? This topic receives plentiful attention in the present work, too, but the discussion is enriched by consideration of the historiographical technique and publication context of the *Bellum Alexandrinum*, as well as by a series of substantial appendices pertaining to the *Corpus Caesarianum* more generally. In tandem with a heroic review of previous scholarship Jan-Felix Gaertner and Bianca Hausburg weave a multi-strand argument for the proposition that the *Bellum Alexandrinum* was produced by Hirtius from drafts by other hands, including Caesar's in *B.Alex.* 1-21, for publication in a corpus edition. Wide-ranging and meticulous as it is, however, the argument will not persuade everyone that the genesis of the work can be specified so precisely. But the philological analyses offered by Gaertner and Hausburg in the course of their study will do much to advance the literary appreciation and historical understanding of the *Bellum Alexandrinum*.

After a concise introduction outlining the volume the argument starts in chapter 2, "The *Bellum Alexandrinum* and the *Corpus Caesarianum*." Here Gaertner and Hausburg examine the ancient evidence on the formation of the (or a) collected edition of narratives of Caesar's military campaigns: the apparently unfinished *Bellum Civile*, the *Epistula ad Balbum* in *Gal.* 8, and Suetonius' description of the corpus extant in his own day (*Jul.* 56.1-4). They conclude that these much-discussed passages are inconclusive on the point at issue in this book, namely, Hirtius' contribution to the *Bellum Alexandrinum*. Accordingly, they turn to the evidence of the text itself.

Chapters 3 and 4, entitled "Language and style of the *Bellum Alexandrinum*," and "Literary technique and historiographical method" respectively, form the heart of
the book, offering detailed investigations into the style and historiography of the *Bellum Alexandrinum* and how these relate to other parts of the corpus, particularly to the books written by Caesar (Gal. 1-7, Civ. 1-3) and Hirtius (Gal. 8; see Appendix A). Different methodologies are used in different sections. Chapter 3 offers traditional comparisons of diction (see Appendices E-I), including those that use synonyms to eliminate absences attributable to subject-matter, and, more broadly, examines stylistic habits such as sentence connection and word order (section 3.5). Chapter 4 looks at phenomena on a still larger scale such as the quality of historical information and its presentation (sections 4.1-2), models of causation (4.3), and historiographical "schools" (4.4-5).

In sections 3.3-4 they refute at length past refutations of the analytical approach to the *Bellum Alexandrinum*, concluding, as did a number of earlier scholars, that the work has different original authors for different sections, and that whereas the first part of the narrative of events in Alexandria (chh. 1-21) is particularly Caesarian, the conclusion of that panel (22-33), and the narratives of events in Illyricum (42-47), Spain (48-64), and Pontus (34-41, 65-78) are distinctly less so.

In both chapters the work of past scholars is often, after judicious consideration, pronounced wanting (see also Appendix J). But the arguments that Gaertner and Hausburg themselves advance seem to me equally inconclusive on the question of authorship, however illuminating they may be as to style and historiographical technique. Apropos of some un-Caesarian expressions in *B.Alex.* 1-21 that conflict with their claim that Caesar is the author of these paragraphs, for example, they resort to special pleading (44-45): "the value of the 18 [un-Caesarian] expressions diminishes even further, if we take into consideration that in the course of writing his *Bellum Gallicum* and *Bellum Civile* Caesar became less strict in his handling of vocabulary and syntax and that his account of events in Alexandria may have been nothing but a draft. ... Moreover, we have to reckon with the possibility that Caesar's continuator Aulus Hirtius may have had to link disparate parts, adjust the beginning and end, or make other minor changes. This may account for the Hirtian touches in *B.Alex.* 1.1, 8.6, 9.4, 11.3, and 19.4." The stylistic fingerprints that they want to identify here appear to be rather smudged.

Furthermore, the role ascribed to Hirtius is curiously mutable. He is firmly excluded as the author of the whole work (35; see also 73): "the attribution of the *Bellum Alexandrinum* to Hirtius should no longer be regarded as a serious option; on the contrary, it may rightly be considered as disproved and indeed should have been discarded a long time ago." But he is just as firmly established as the editor of the whole work, indeed of the whole corpus (161-62): "Hirtius' intervention in the war of words after Caesar's death must be regarded as a full success, for the pro-Caesarian account of the Civil War which he published (emphasis mine) is still one of the most important sources on the Roman Civil War and has influenced the perception of Caesar from 43 BC to the present day." As was mentioned above, Hirtius is imagined to have supplied "Hirtian touches" in the Caesarian chapters 1-21, but not to have changed their underlying "sober and seemingly objective" Thucydidean style (93). Yet the argument of sections 3.5 and 4.1-5 is based on the assumption that Hirtius imposed his linguistic preferences and a consistent "tragic history" style on chapters 22-78, which, despite their different sources, are shown to share un-Caesarian features. 3 (This point comes out more clearly in chapter 5 (see below); in chapters 3-4 the dominant dichotomy is Caesar/not-Caesar.) The
assumption underpinning the argument of section 4.1, namely, that the density and quality of information are consistent in a single-authored work, also strikes me as implausible. In any case it not tested against Caesar's *commentarii* or Gal. 8. 4 The same can be said for the discussion about the presence and absence of counterfactual history and prolepses (section 4.4).

The question of authorship dominates these chapters, especially the Caesarian authorship of *B.Alex*. 1-21, but their value seems to me to lie rather in the nuanced treatment of the work's diction and usage, the in-depth analyses of scenes such as the naval battles at Alexandria (122-42), and the discussion of topics such as the text's propagandistic elements (94-110) and the varying guises of *fortuna*, who appears both as chance and as the "mystic *Fortuna Caesaris*" (110-16). These introduce us to key features of the work itself, which are worth seeing regardless of who put them there. For example, this (165): "The heterogeneous character of the *Bellum Alexandrinum* ... not only illustrates, but in a sense contains the contemporary debate about how to write history: on the one hand the work attests to the great popularity and influence of Thucydides in the time immediately preceding Sallust, but on the other hand it also reflects the huge impact which the Hellenistic Greek historians have had on the shaping of Roman historiography." Until we get the detailed philological commentary on the *Bellum Alexandrinum* that Gaertner and Hausburg repeatedly desiderate, the fine work in this book will serve us well.

In the brief final chapter, "The publication of the *Bellum Alexandrinum* and its historical context," Hirtius looms larger. He is the editor who compiled drafts by Caesar and other Caesarians into the *Bellum Alexandrinum* and established the death of Pothinus (*Civ*. 3.112.12) as the terminal point of Book 3 of Caesar's *Bellum Civile* (155-57).5 He also imposed a consistent historiographical ethos on chapters 22-78 of the *Bellum Alexandrinum*, one that was based on Cicero's ideas of history-writing (158): "the later chapters of the *Bellum Alexandrinum* which were added by Hirtius can be read as an application of Cicero's view on historiography." In the conclusion, apropos of the corpus as a whole, Gaertner and Hausburg suggest that, while Hirtius "integrated" reports by other hands into the *Bellum Alexandrinum*, he "added" the *Bellum Africum* and *Bellum Hispianiense* to his edition virtually unchanged (164-65), pressed as he was for time and beset by ill health.6

*Caesar and the Bellum Alexandrinum*, the first full-length study of the *Bellum Alexandrinum* since Otto Seel's 1935 *Hirtius*, is a timely contribution to the lively field of Roman historiography. The fact that many long-standing questions about it still lack definitive answers only increases the importance of the ground-breaking step taken here in asking new questions of this fascinating text.

Notes:

1. List of appendices: A. The authorship and authenticity of the *Epistula ad Balbum* and Gal. 8; B. *hostis, inimicus*, and the date of composition of the *Bellum Civile*; C. The book division between *Civ*. 1 and *Civ*. 2; D. The chronology of the events in the two *Hispaniae*, Africa, and at Massilia in 49 BC; E. The vocabulary
of Hirt. *Gal.* 8 and the *Bellum Alexandrinum*; F. The distribution of *hapax legomena* in the Caesarian *commentarii*; G. Expressions occurring several times in *B.Alex* 1-78; H. Significant phrases shared by the *Bellum Alexandrinum* and Hirt. *Gal.* 8; I. Significant parallels between the *Bellum Alexandrinum* and the Caesarian *commentarii*; J. Expressions previously misidentified as Hirtian or un-Caesarian; K. Pronouns and connectives in Caesar, the *Bellum Alexandrinum*, and Hirtius; L. Political value terms and expressions pointing to emotions; M. Maps

2. One quibble on the discussion of the *Epistula*: at *Gal.* 8.pr.2 Gaertner and Hausburg accept the emendation *competentibus* after reviewing other repairs for the transmitted *comparantibus*, a reading that they dismiss summarily (22-23, with n. 30). But *comparantibus* is printed by W. Hering in his 1987 Teubner edition of *Gal.* without any indication in the apparatus of a textual problem. That vote of confidence deserves at least a mention here, even if it isn't material to the argument. In general, however, Gaertner and Hausburg are laudably attentive to problems in the text of the *Bellum Alexandrinum*, frequently reporting variants and emendations. They even offer an emendation of their own, the addition of <praeter eos> after *oppidanorum* at 15.8.

3. The nature of the historiographical style of *Gal.* 8, which Gaertner and Hausburg believe to be by Hirtius (see Appendix A), is not brought to bear on this issue. The problem of reconciling the claim that "we can discern two parts that belong to two different literary traditions" (154) with the claim that the work is "little more than a patchwork of separate reports" (93) is raised only briefly (159 n. 20).

4. The issue is touched upon in a footnote apropos of *Civ.* 2, but the arguments there summarized treat the issue of *Legatenberichte* more broadly, not the question of consistency in the density and quality of information (122-23, n. 190).

5. I note here that this book division conflicts with Hirtius' much-quoted assertion at *Gal.* 8.48.10 that Caesar aligned books and years, which is cited by Gaertner and Hausburg as one of three "indisputable" bits of evidence for the proposition that *Civ.* 1-2 constitute a single book (203, in Appendix C). The year 48 ends during Caesar's stay in Alexandria, but the break, which must occur somewhere after *B.Alex.* 11, is invisible in the text.

6. They also mention the idea of a later redactor (164; see also 27). This shadowy figure is probably necessary to account for the discrepancy between Hirtius' description of a corpus that runs to the end of Caesar's life (*Gal.* 8.pr.2), i.e., to 15 March 44 BC, and the corpus that we have, which is organized around wars, the last of which ended at Munda a year earlier.