

# GREAT ENIGMAS IN HISTORY



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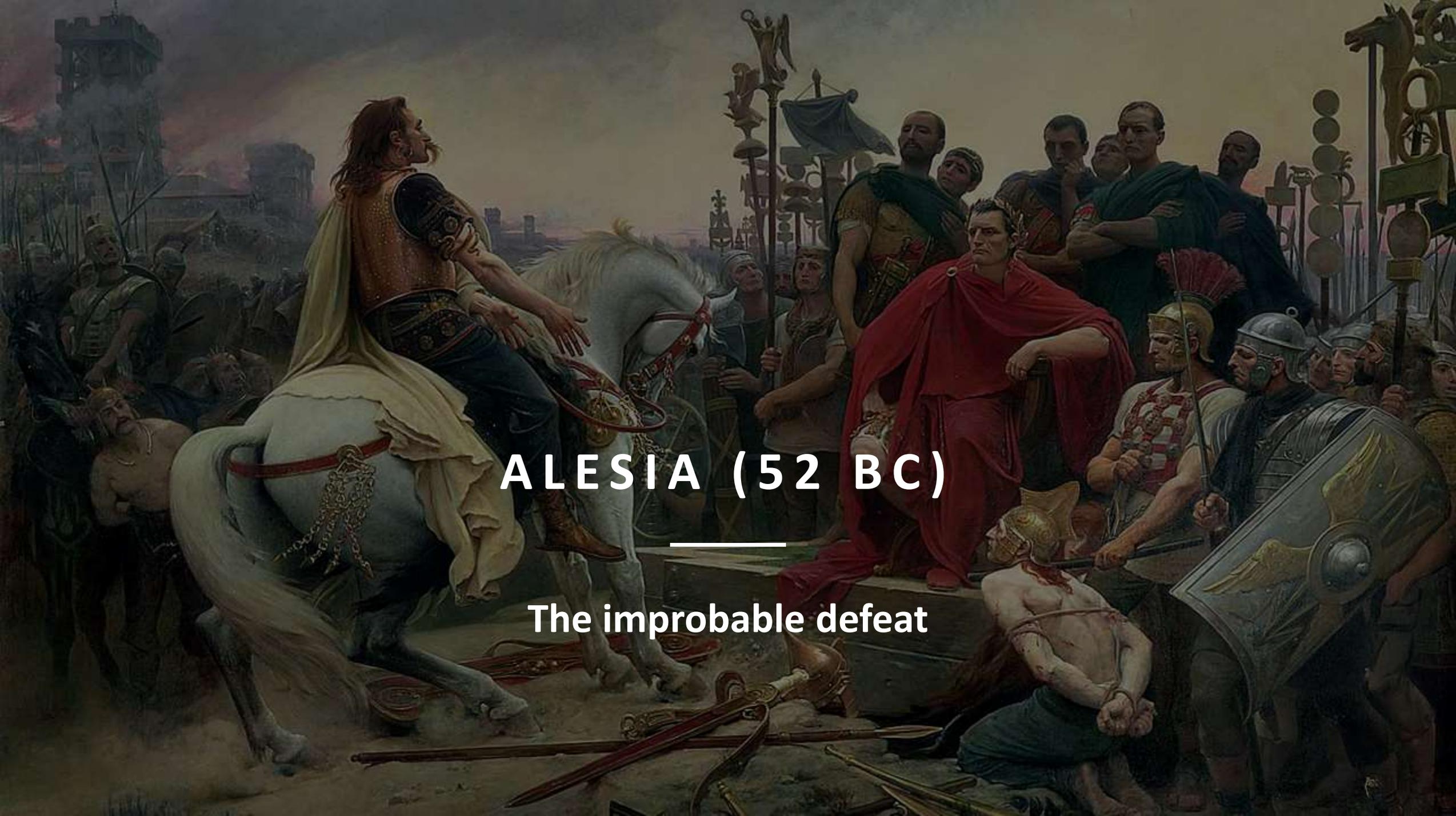
Click on **Courses and conferences**

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# Course outline

- Alesia: the improbable defeat (52 BC)
- The Man in the Iron Mask
- The Affair of the Poisons: a shadow over the Sun King (1678)
- The Affair of the Necklace (1785-1786): was Marie-Antoinette guilty?
- The mysterious disappearance of Sir Benjamin Bathurst (1809)
- The mysterious death of Louis II of Bavaria (1886)
- The assassination of JFK (1963)
- De Gaulle in Baden-Baden: a calculated move? (1969)
- Who wanted to kill John Paul II? (1981)



# ALESIA (52 BC)

The improbable defeat

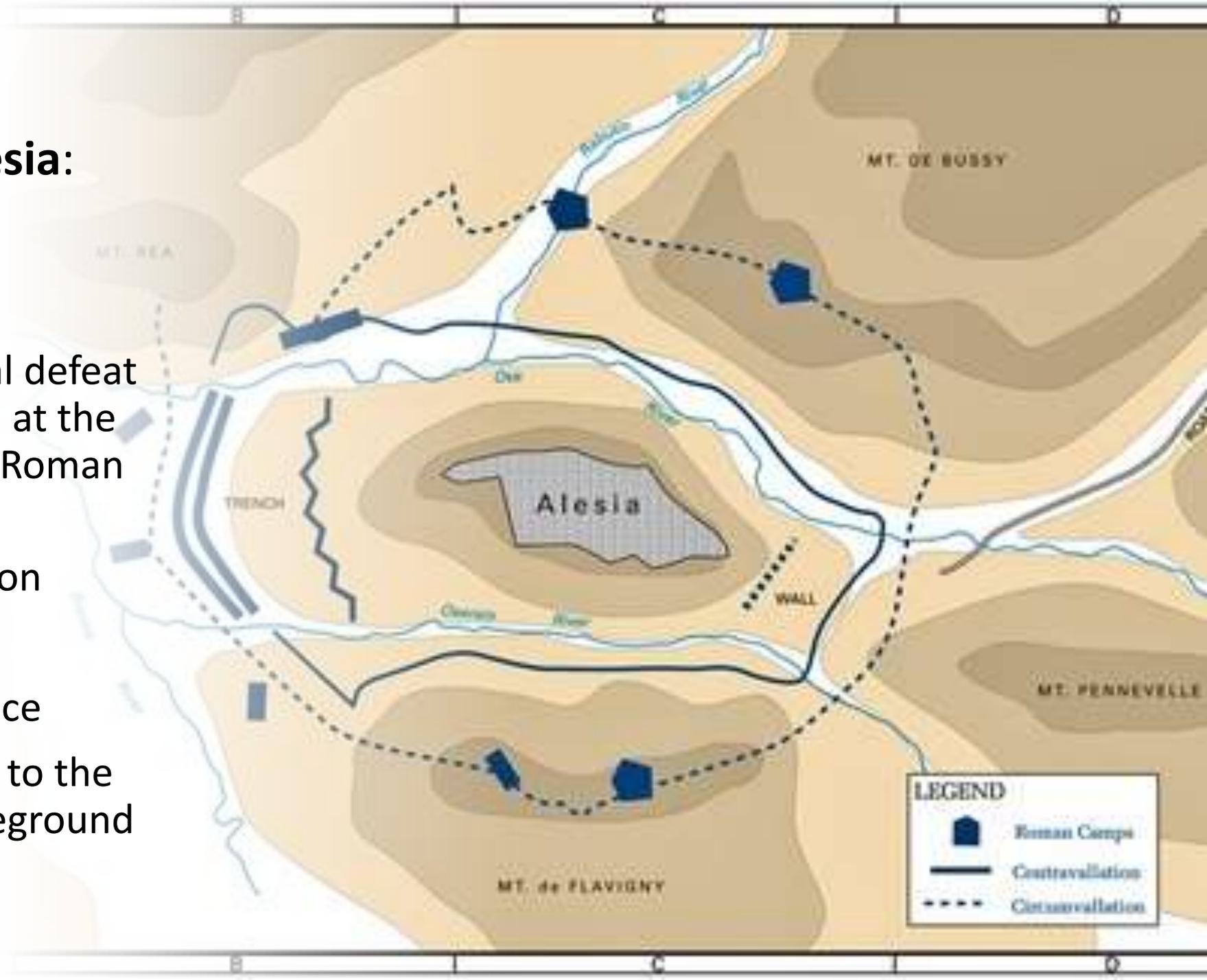
# Remembering **Alesia**: a **paradox**

A **crushing defeat** (the final defeat of rebellious Gallic tribes) at the hands of the all-powerful Roman legions

The end of a civilization

Great interest in France

Ongoing controversies as to the exact location of the battleground



# Alise-Sainte-Reine



## An enigma

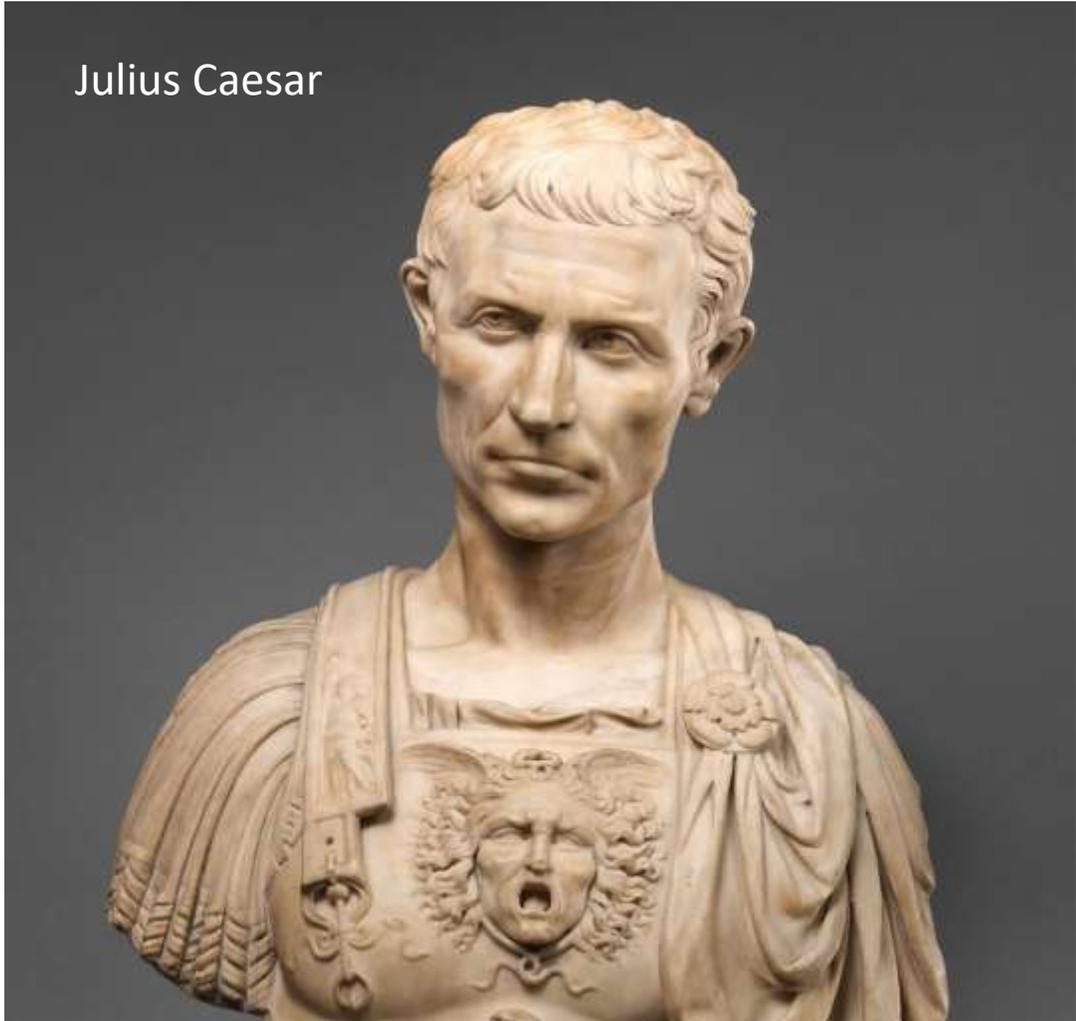
The **Gauls** (group of Celtic peoples of Continental Europe): the largest army ever gathered (over 300 000 men)

How did the Gauls end up losing to Caesar's legions (60 000 men)?

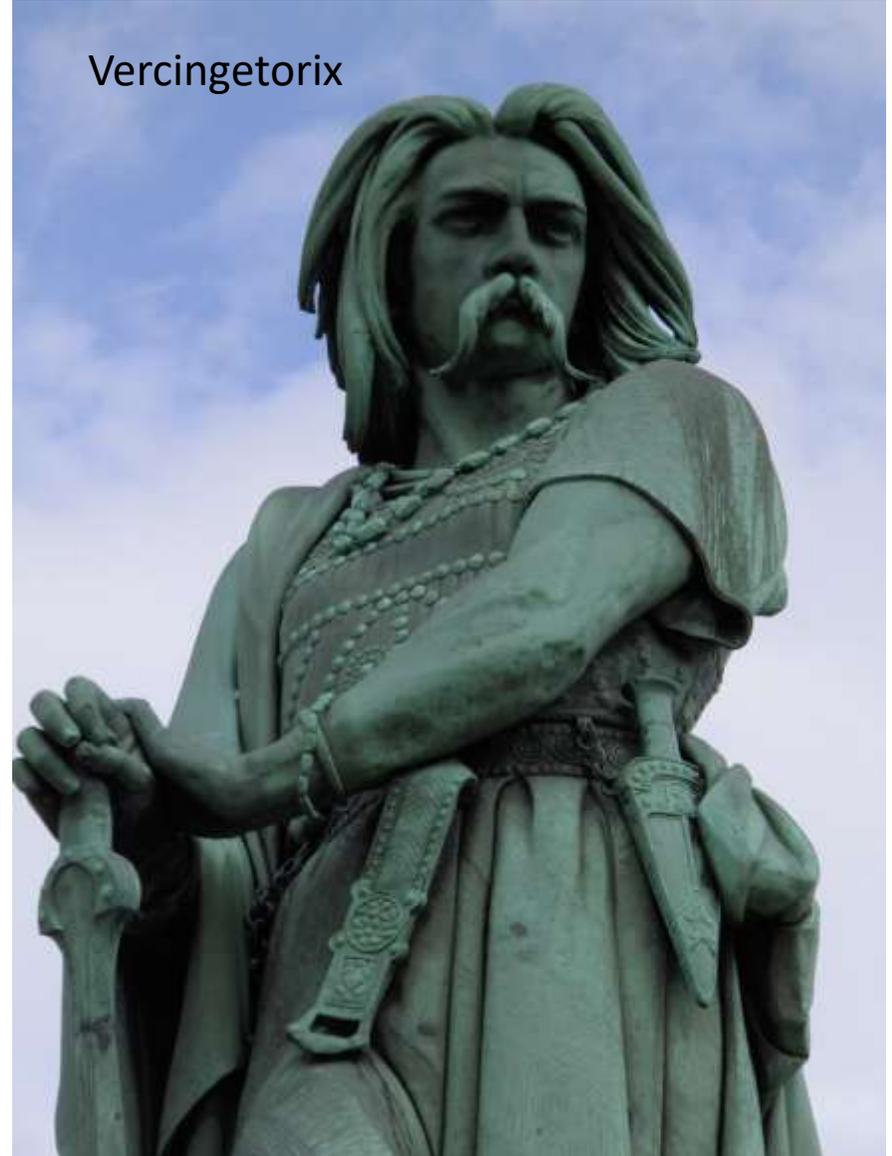
The end of the Gallic Wars



Julius Caesar



Vercingetorix



## Caesar: the only source

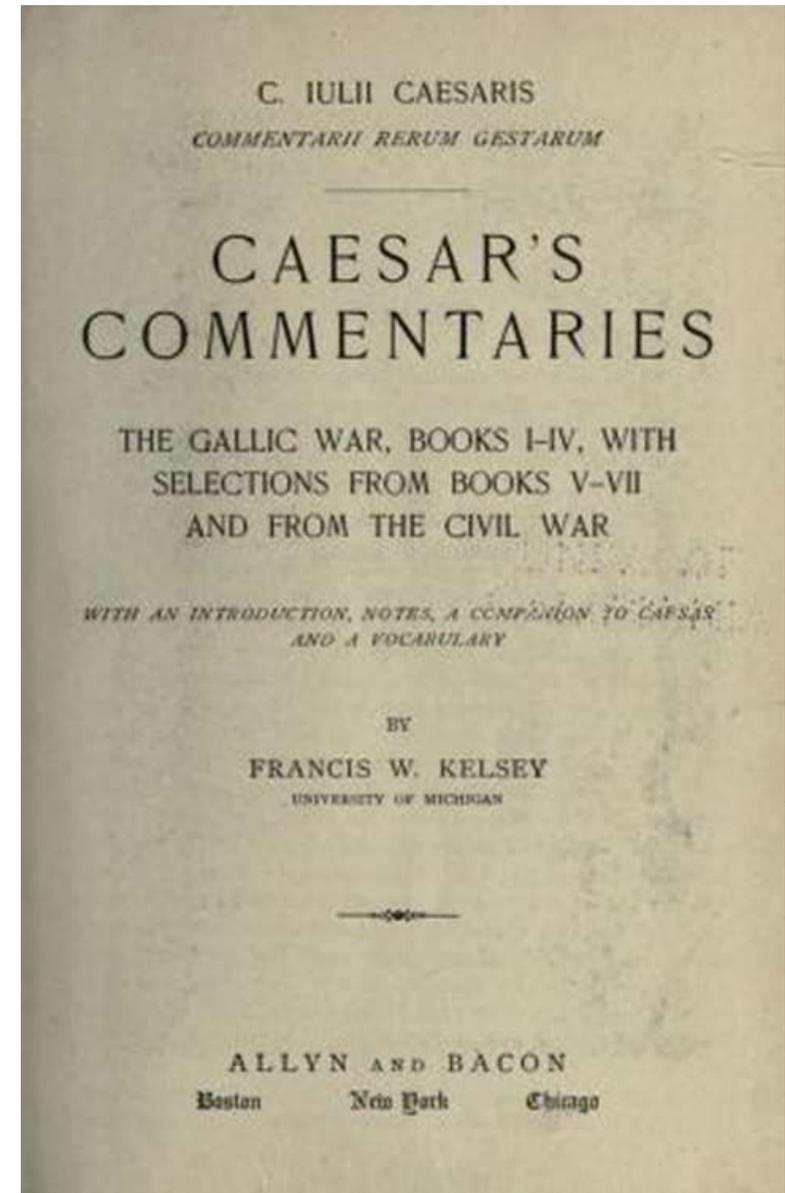
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**Detailed account** of the Gallic Wars (58-50 BC) written by Caesar **who won** over the Gauls

Lack of partiality

Caesar: a talented writer able to present his **embellished version** of the facts

Exercising our **critical thinking** skills



The release of his *Commentaries on the Gallic War*

A **political masterpiece** as well as a battlefield diary to help his **electoral campaign** (the seeking of a second Consulate)

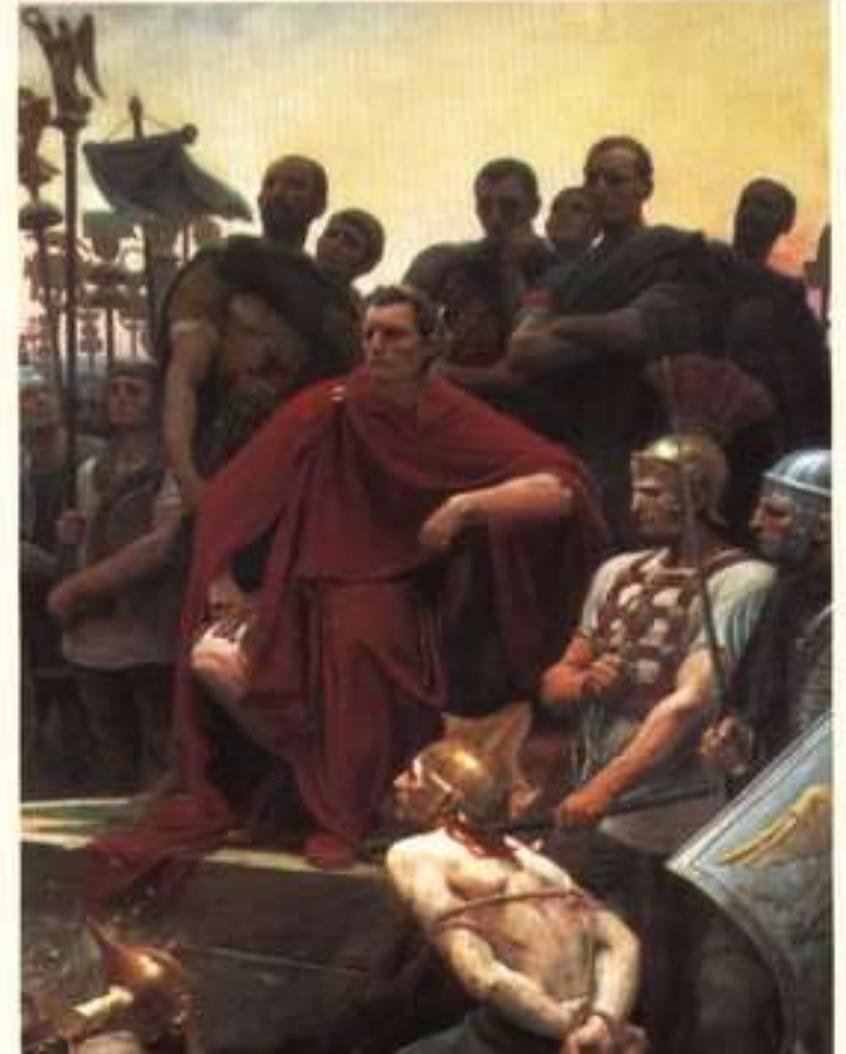
To establish his political acumen

7 books (one per war year) eagerly awaited in Rome

A literary success & a formidable **propaganda** tool

CAESAR  
THE GALLIC WAR

A new translation by Carolyn Hammond



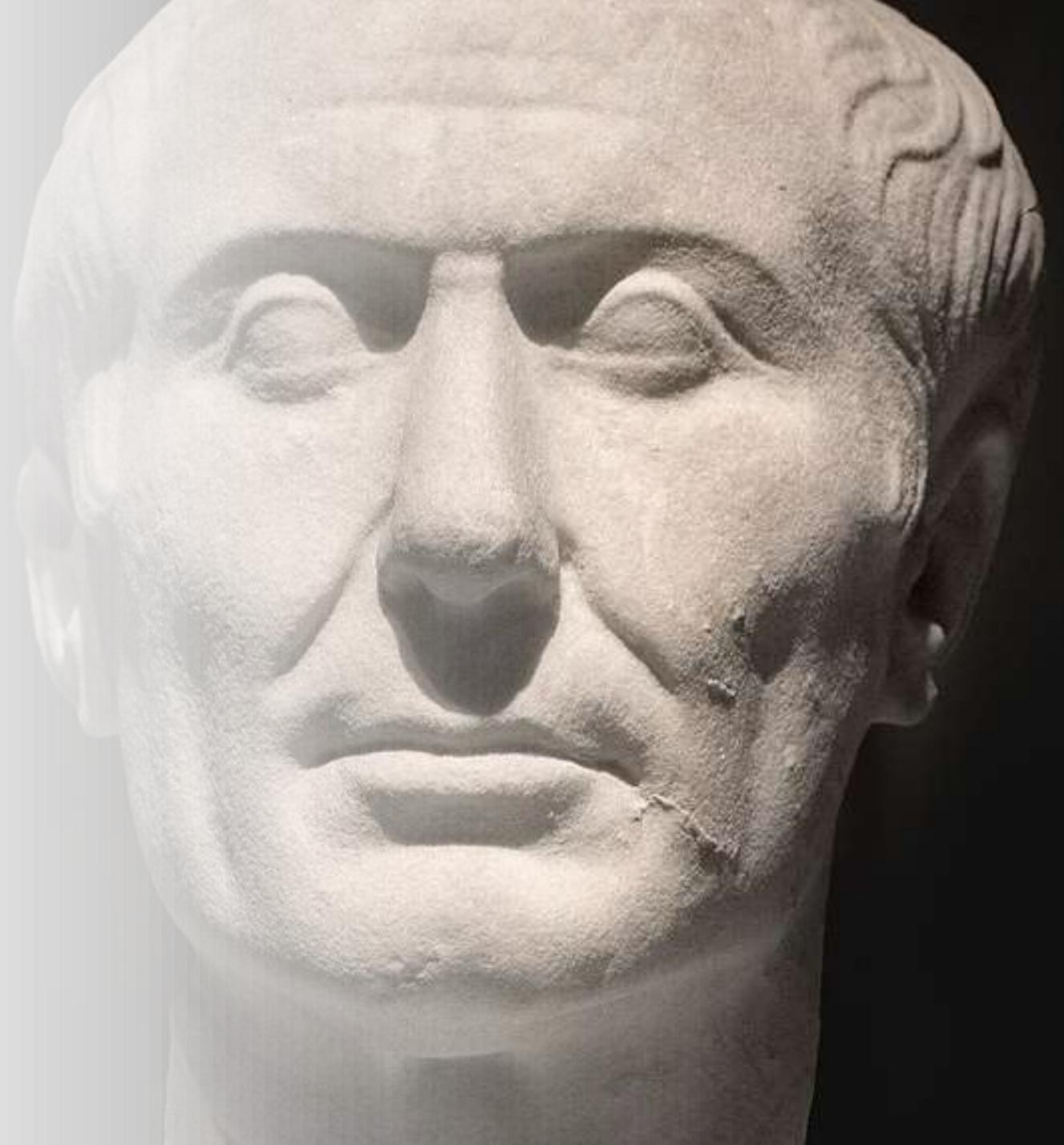


## Julius Caesar

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A member of the highest Roman  
**aristocracy**

Reduced political influence until  
59 BC



## Caesar elected **Consul** in 59

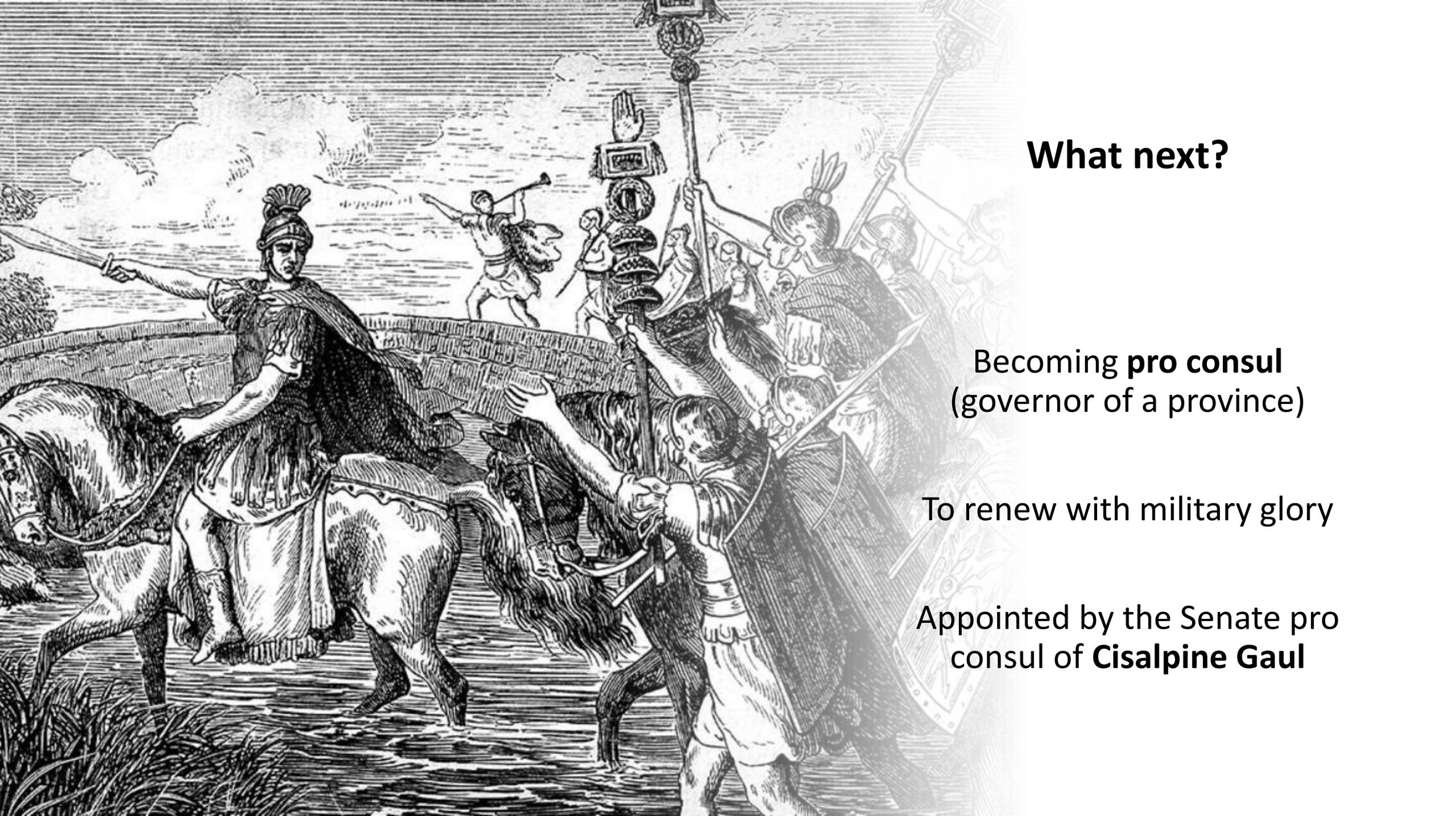
Consul: highest elected political  
office in Rome

Elected for 1 year

Two consuls in power at any given  
time

Caesar's Consulship: intense  
political activity





## What next?

Becoming **pro consul**  
(governor of a province)

To renew with military glory

Appointed by the Senate pro  
consul of **Cisalpine Gaul**

59 BC



Cenabum

Alesia

Vesontio

Bibracte

Avaricum

Geneva

Octodorus

Mediolanum

Nemossos

GALLIA  
TRANSALPINA

GALLIA  
CISALPINA

Genua

Luna

Florentia



Massalia

Narbo

ITALIA





## Calculated intentions towards Gaul

A war easy to win to support his political ambitions & enhance his military reputation

Acquiring fame and wealth

# Who were the Gauls?

A complex question

The “Gauls” never defined themselves

Foreign perceptions (Greeks & Romans)

The Gauls: the inhabitants of a  
“barbarian” country beyond the Alps  
(Gaul – *Gallia*)



# Who were the Gauls?

The Gauls: the “other”, the “foreigner”  
who cannot be assimilated

Populations deemed unstable to control  
and submit

A brilliant & sophisticated Celtic  
civilization (archeology)



## Active commerce with Rome

Roman oil and wines vs. minerals, farm products, tools, vehicles (chariots, two or four-wheeled carriages), clothes, soap, barrels...



Tortoise ( shield-wall) formation



Julius Caesar

# First century BC: Rome's growing influence

Gaul politically divided in 3 great confederations (Belgians, Celts & Aquitani)

90 autonomous tribes (political entities)

Population (likely 8 million)





A string of common political institutions

The “Council of Gaul” (Caesar): representatives of each tribe gathered once a year

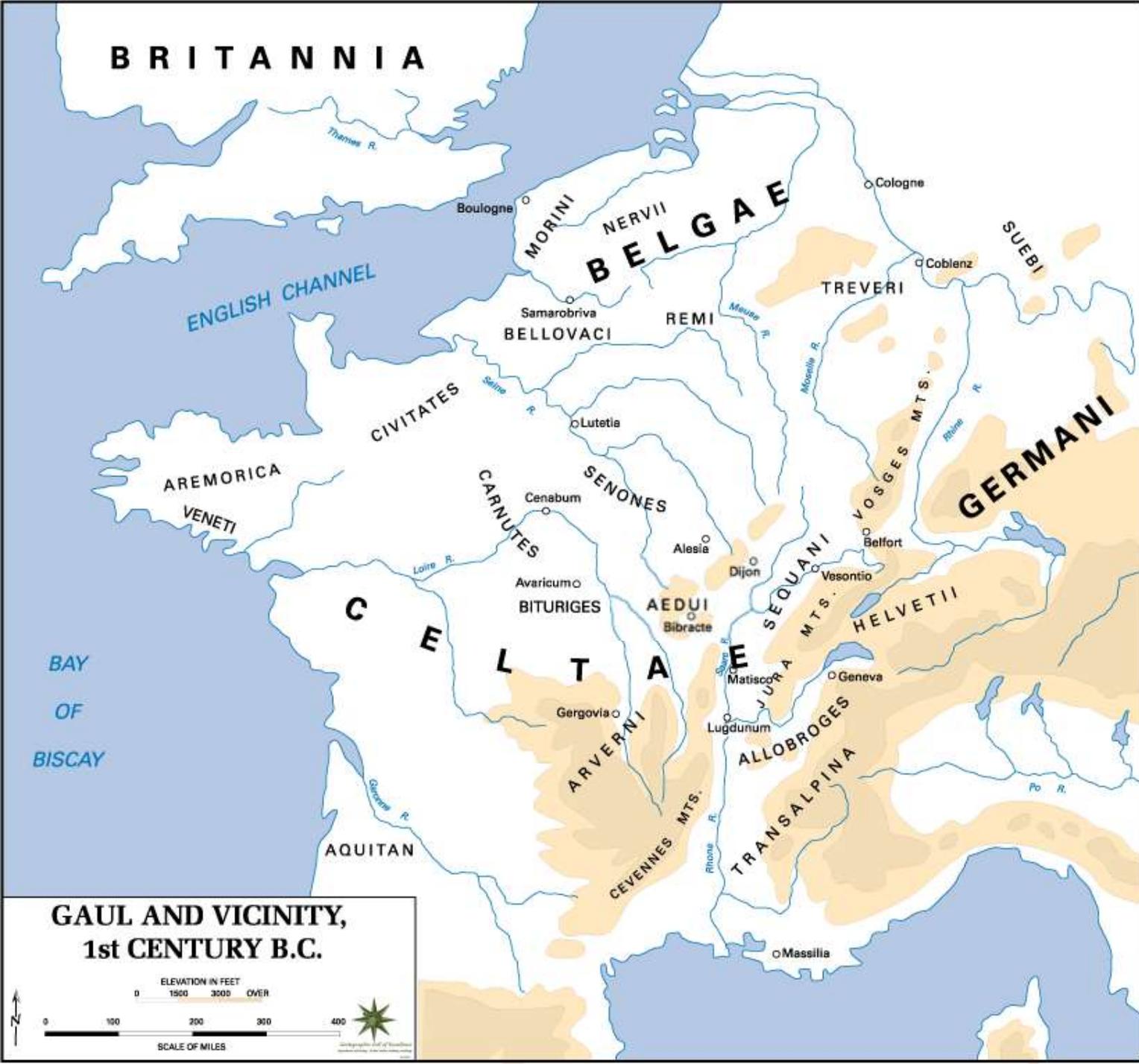
A tribe designated to arbitrate conflicts

Moral authority to raise a confederate army



**Druids (worship, divination & judicial procedure**

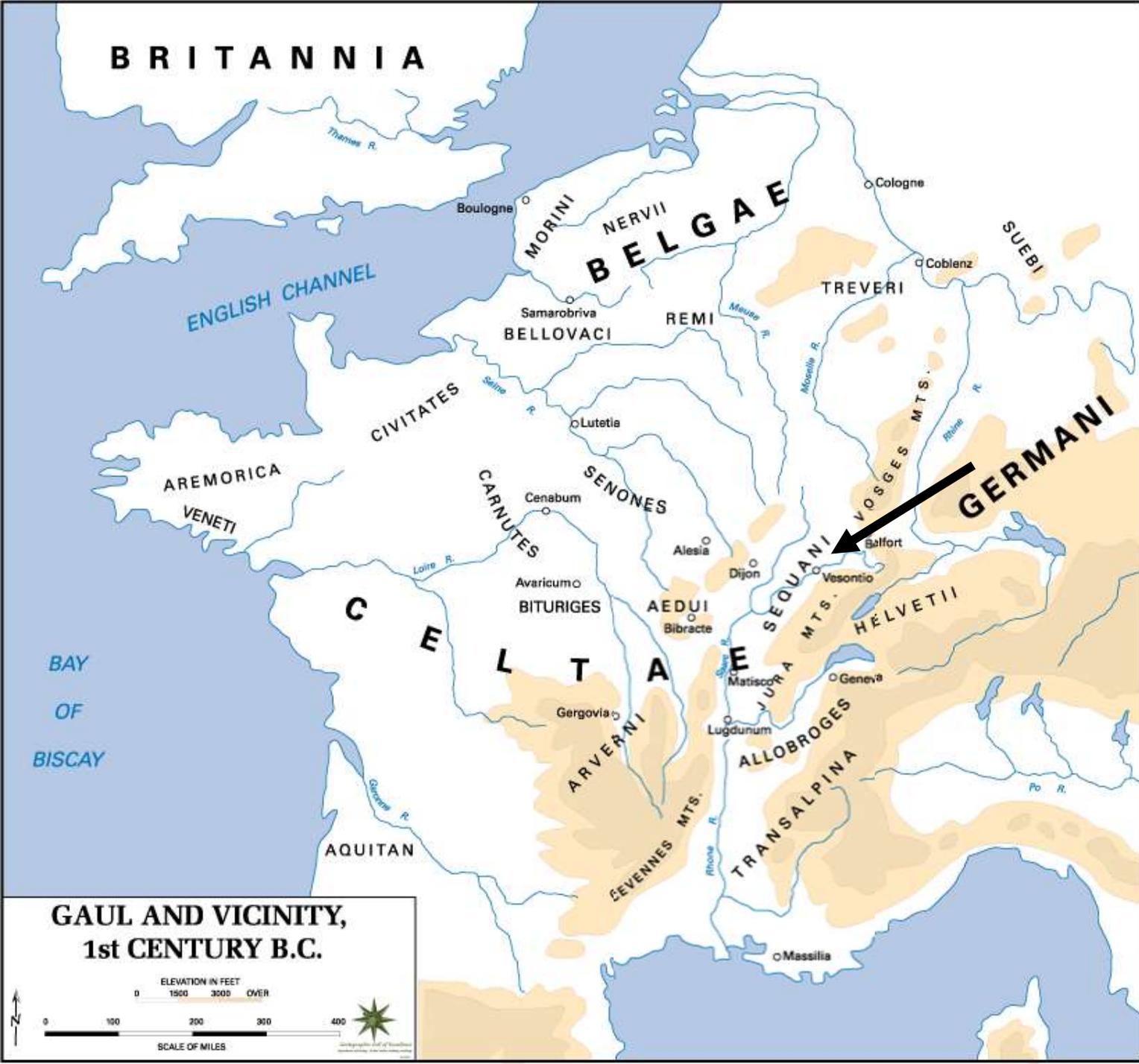




Commerce with Rome: a source of conflicts

The **Aedui** (the “Ardent”): allies of Rome

Goods imported from Rome transited via their territory

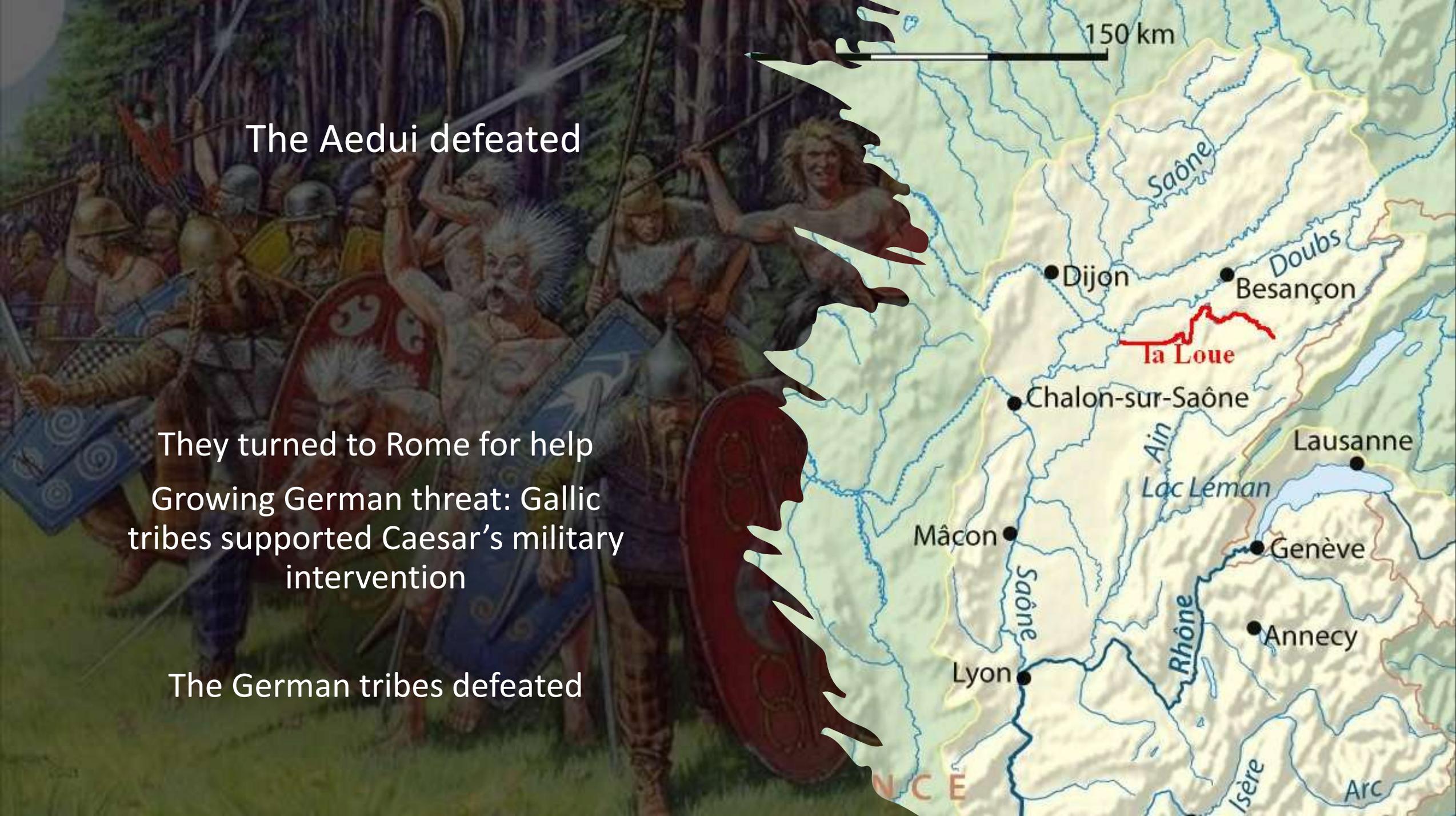


Commerce with Rome: a source of conflicts

The **Saône river**: a source of conflict with the **Sequani** (control over the river + tolls)

Local wars

The Sequani enlisted the help of **German tribes** (formidable foes)



The Aedui defeated

They turned to Rome for help  
Growing German threat: Gallic  
tribes supported Caesar's military  
intervention

The German tribes defeated



## Vercingetorix to lead the rebellion

Vercingetorix: chief of the  
Arverni tribe

An astute politician & diplomat

A young hostage who befriended  
Caesar?

Excellent knowledge of Roman  
military strategy



## Vercingetorix to lead the rebellion

A Gallic **coalition** of 100 000 men

Vercingetorix able to unite a  
group of disparate tribes

A formidable alliance against  
Rome

An important **turning point** in  
the Gallic Wars



## Caesar's speedy return from Italy

Crossing of the Alps in winter

Arrived in central France much  
earlier than expected





## The recapture of Cenabum (Orléans)

In pursuit of Vercingetorix's army

Gallic planned retreat: **scorched-earth policy** to prevent the Romans from securing supplies

## Vercingetorix: a **coherent strategy**

1. Gathering a significant army
2. **Logistics** (supplies in food and weapons)
3. Scorched earth tactic to demoralize the Romans

Attacking Caesar's supply lines rather than a frontal battle





## The siege of **Avaricum** (Bourges)

The town to be spared

March 52 BC: a 27-day siege  
Gallic bravery noted in the *Gallic Wars*







Retreat

Joining the forces of his lieutenant  
(Titus Labienus) in the north

## Capture of Lutetia (Paris)

Summer of 52 BC: joint Roman  
forces moving south towards  
Provence

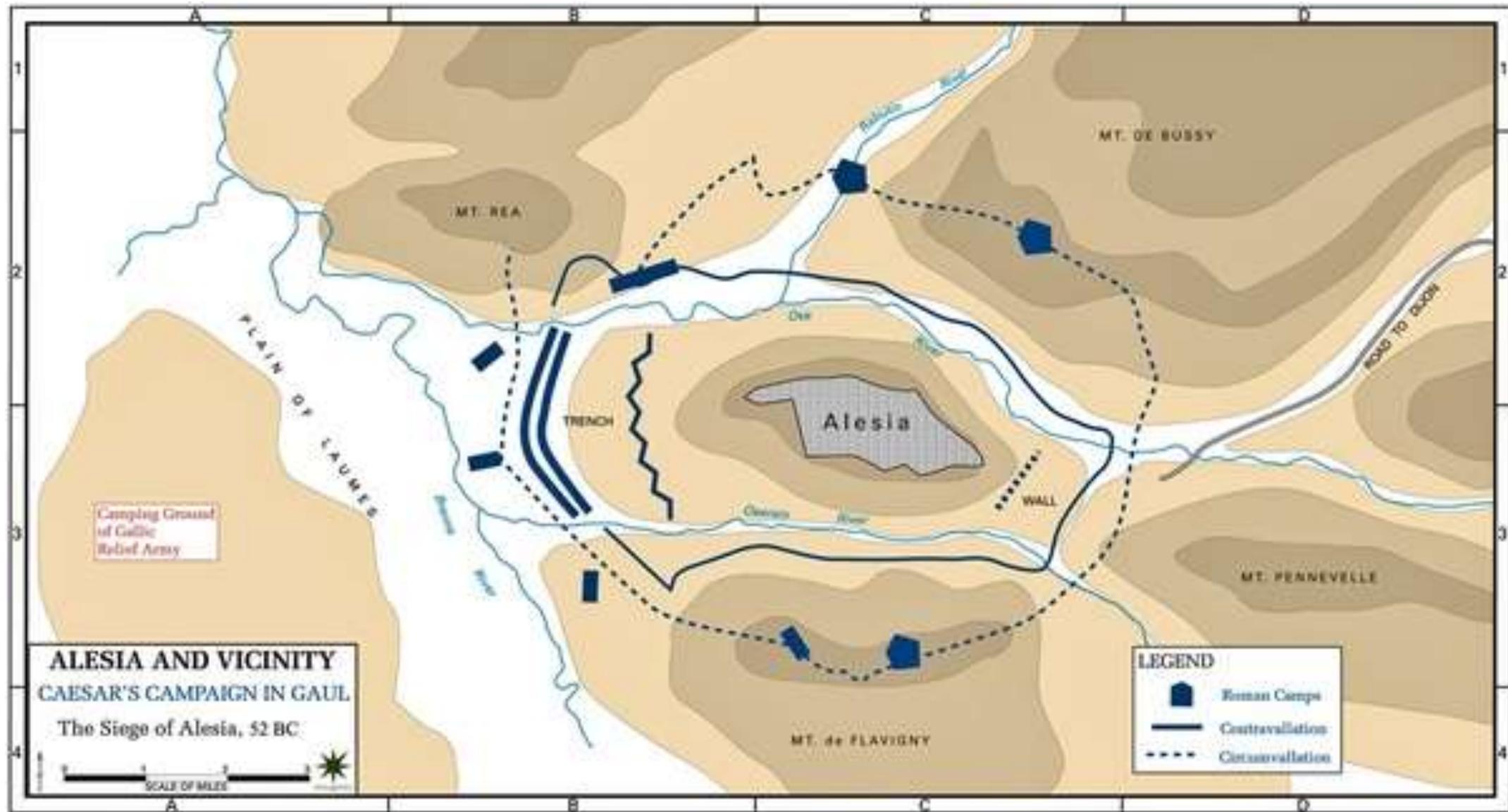




## Alesia

Vercingetorix's plan: to intercept and destroy Caesar's army

The choice of the stronghold of the *oppidum* (fortified settlement) of Alesia

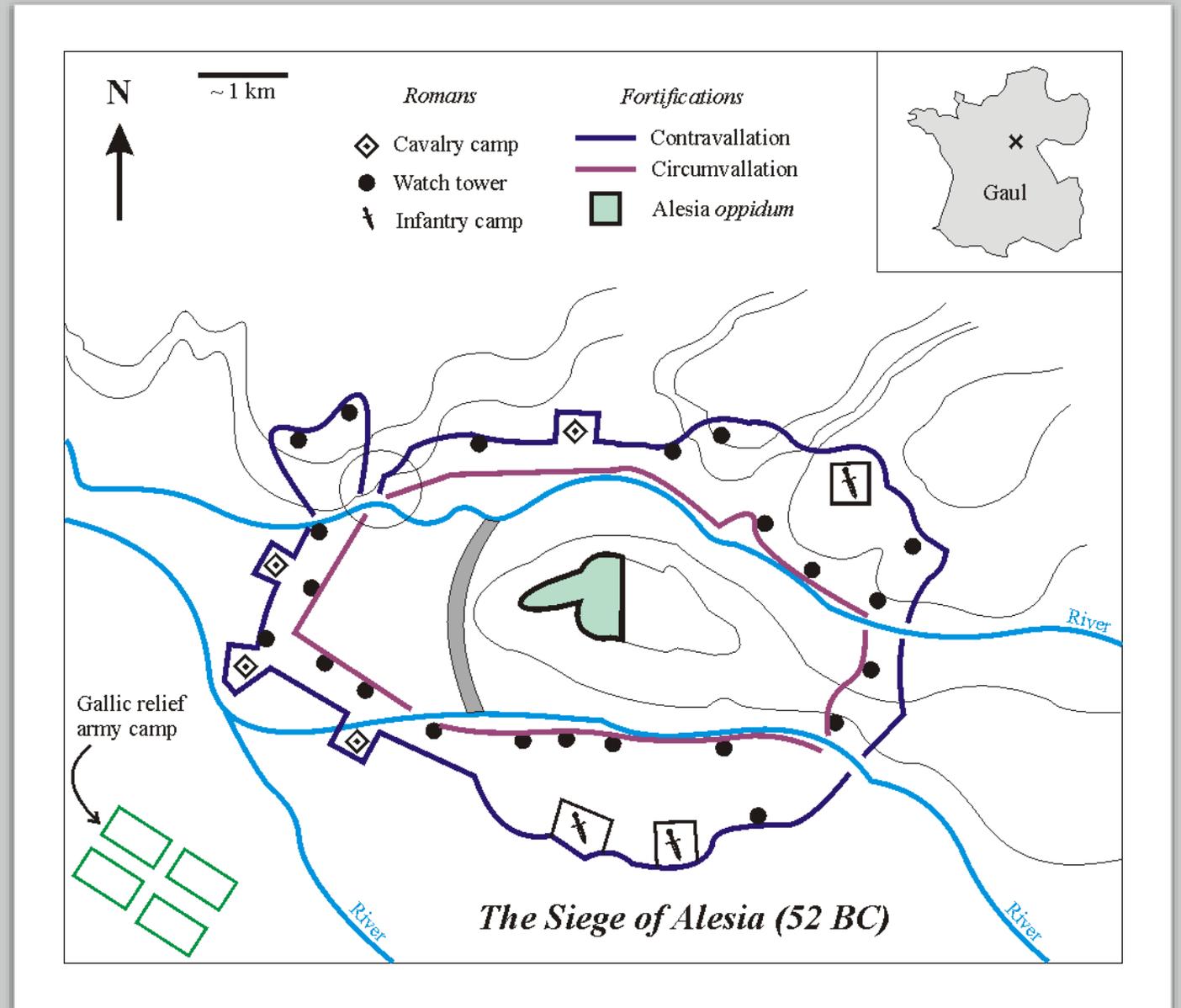


# Vercingetorix's plan

To force Caesar to stop his advance towards the south and lay siege to Alesia

Increasing Caesar's supply problems

Gathering a relief force



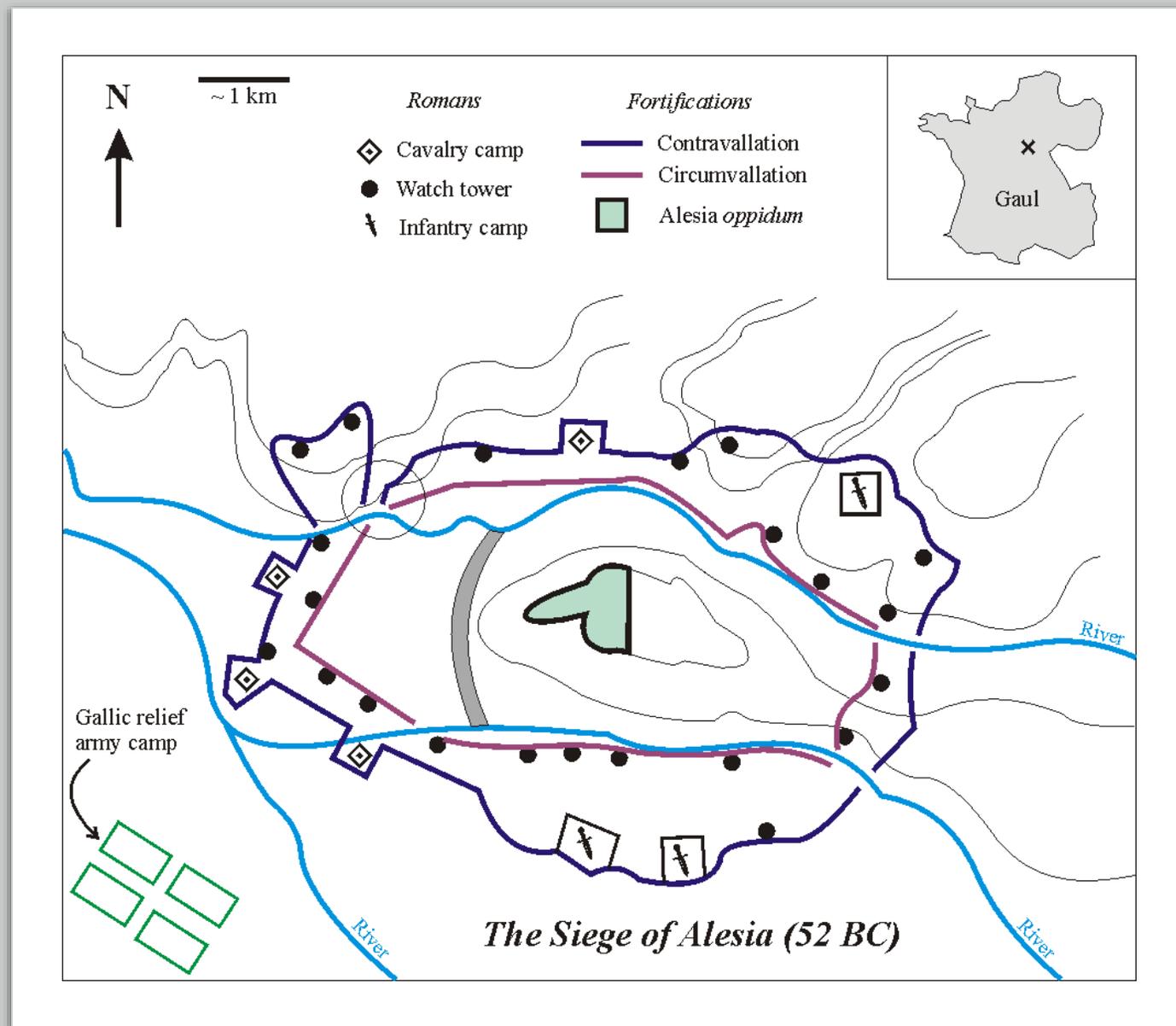
# Caesar's plan

An assault on Alesia out of the question

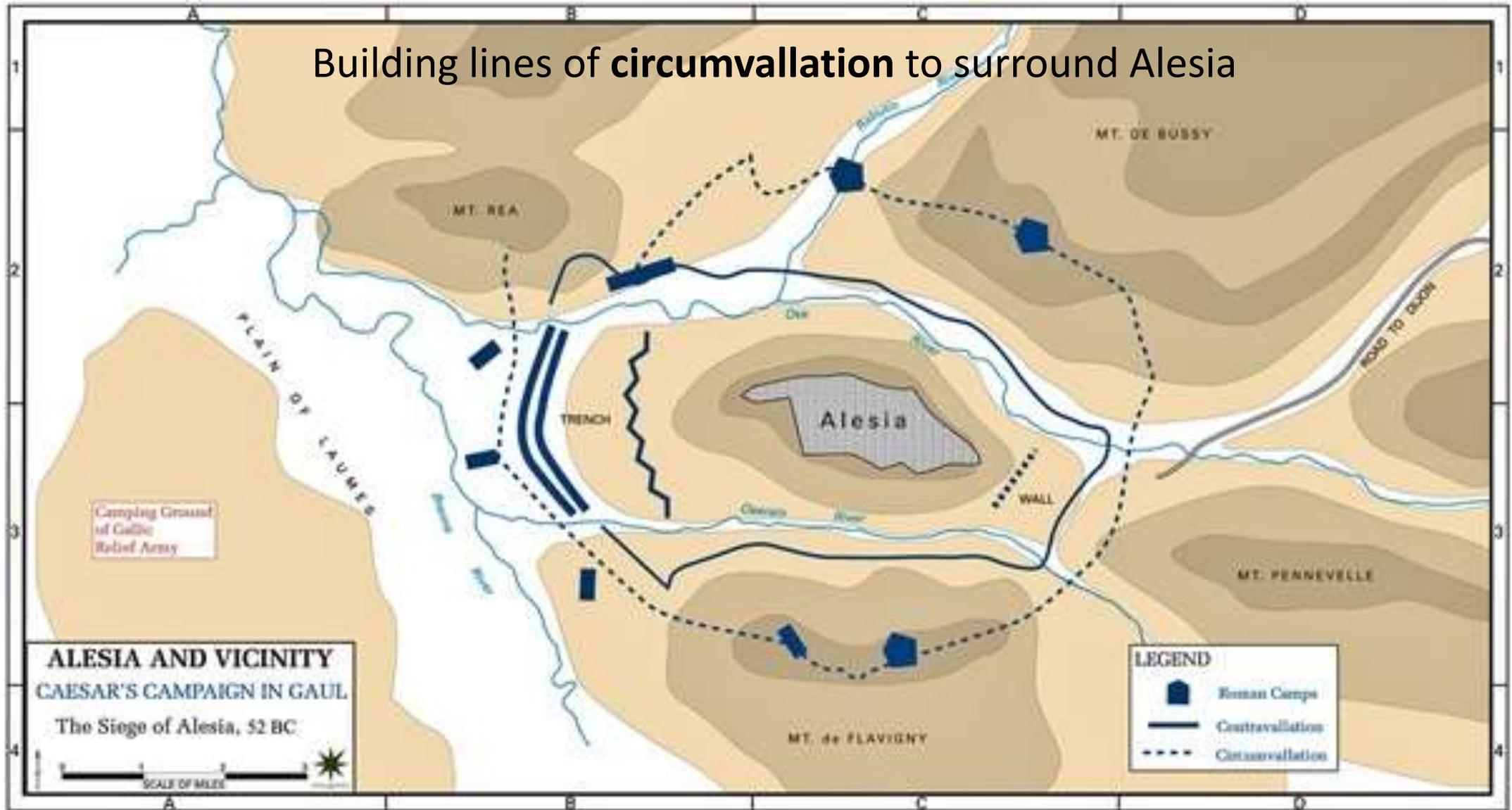
Decision to besiege Alesia

Roman camps set up on high ground all around Alesia

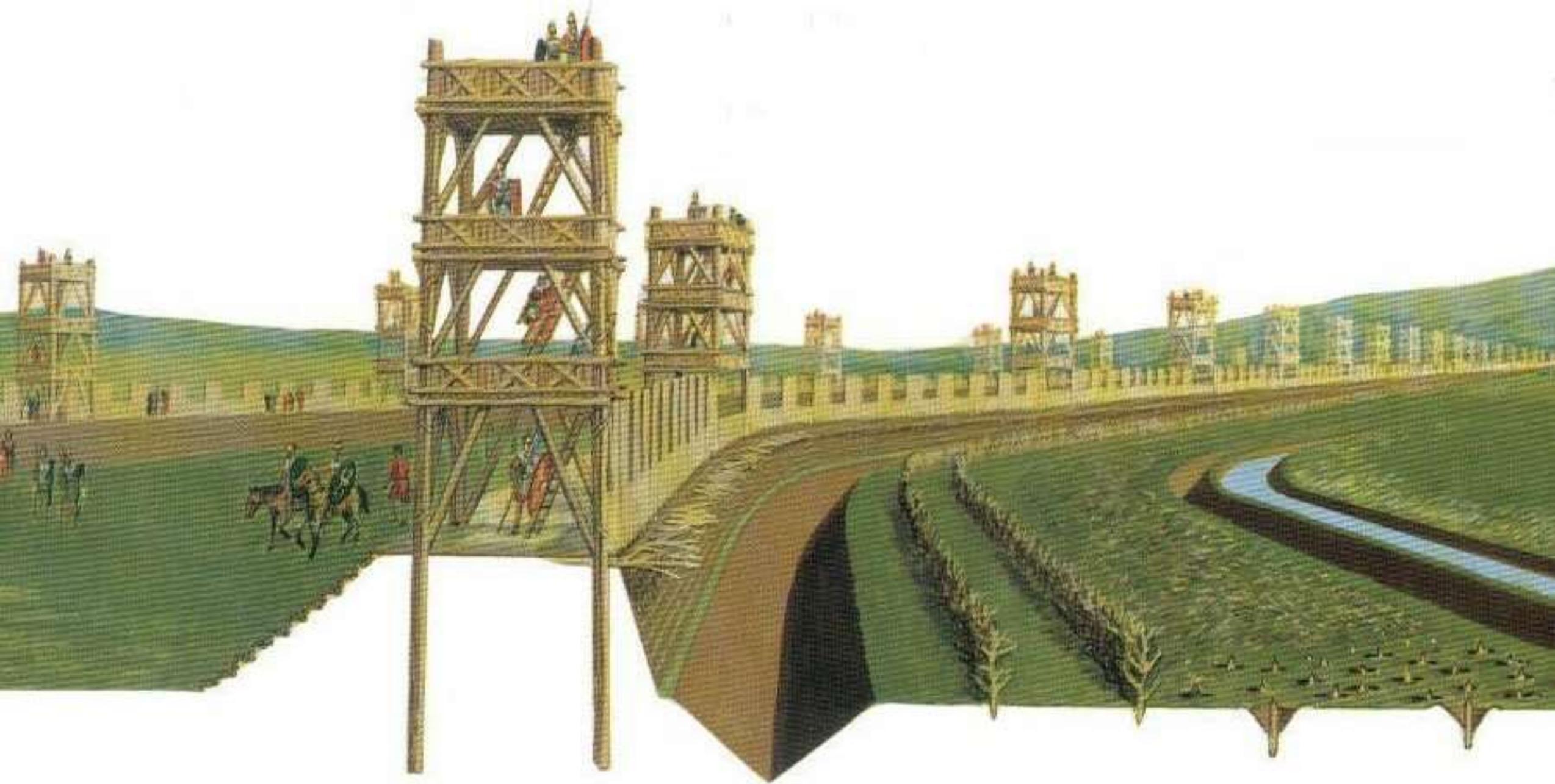
Valleys & spaces between the hills blocked



## Building lines of **circumvallation** to surround Alesia

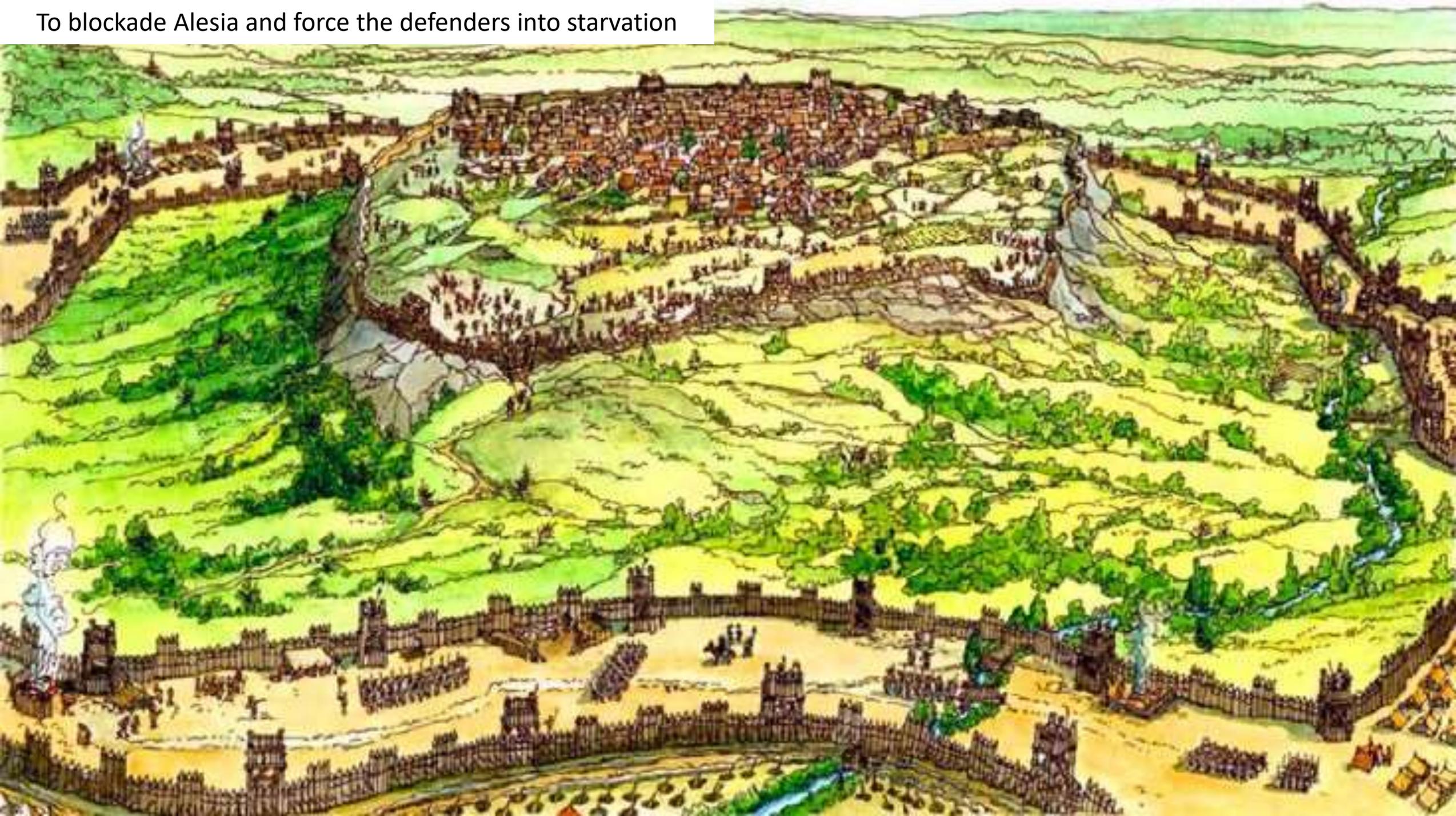






A long-term operation (a passive siege) – No assault (too costly)

To blockade Alesia and force the defenders into starvation



Vercingetorix: call for help

Cavalry sent away at night with  
order to gather a relief force  
(250 000 men gathered in **3  
weeks**)

80 000 men at Alesia but supplies  
for only 30 days



# Caesar aware of Vercingetorix's plan

The prospect of a combined attack  
by two Gallic armies

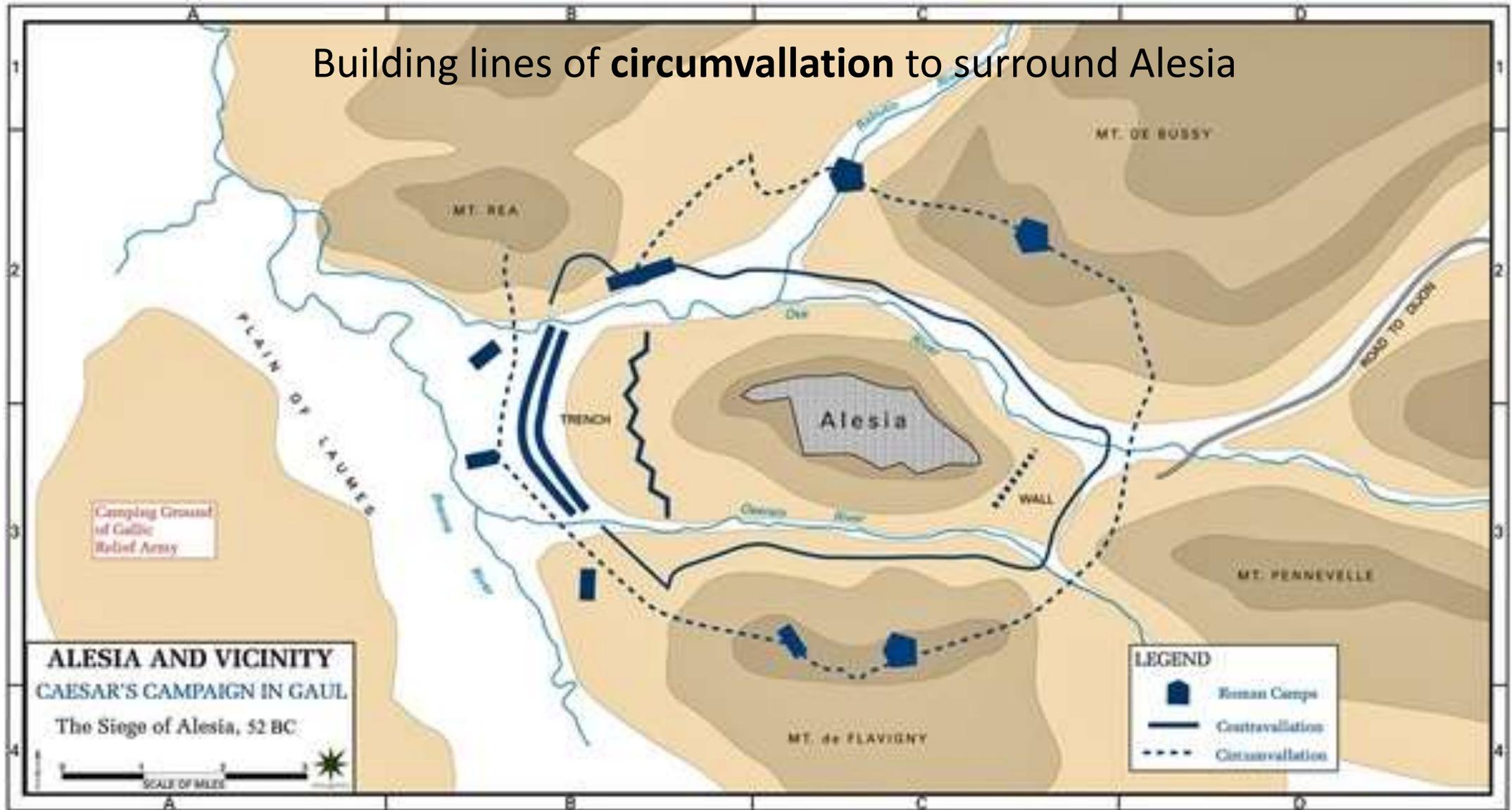
The construction of a line of  
contravallation facing outwards (to  
protect the Roman legions)

20km in circumference

Romans besieging Alesia while being  
besieged

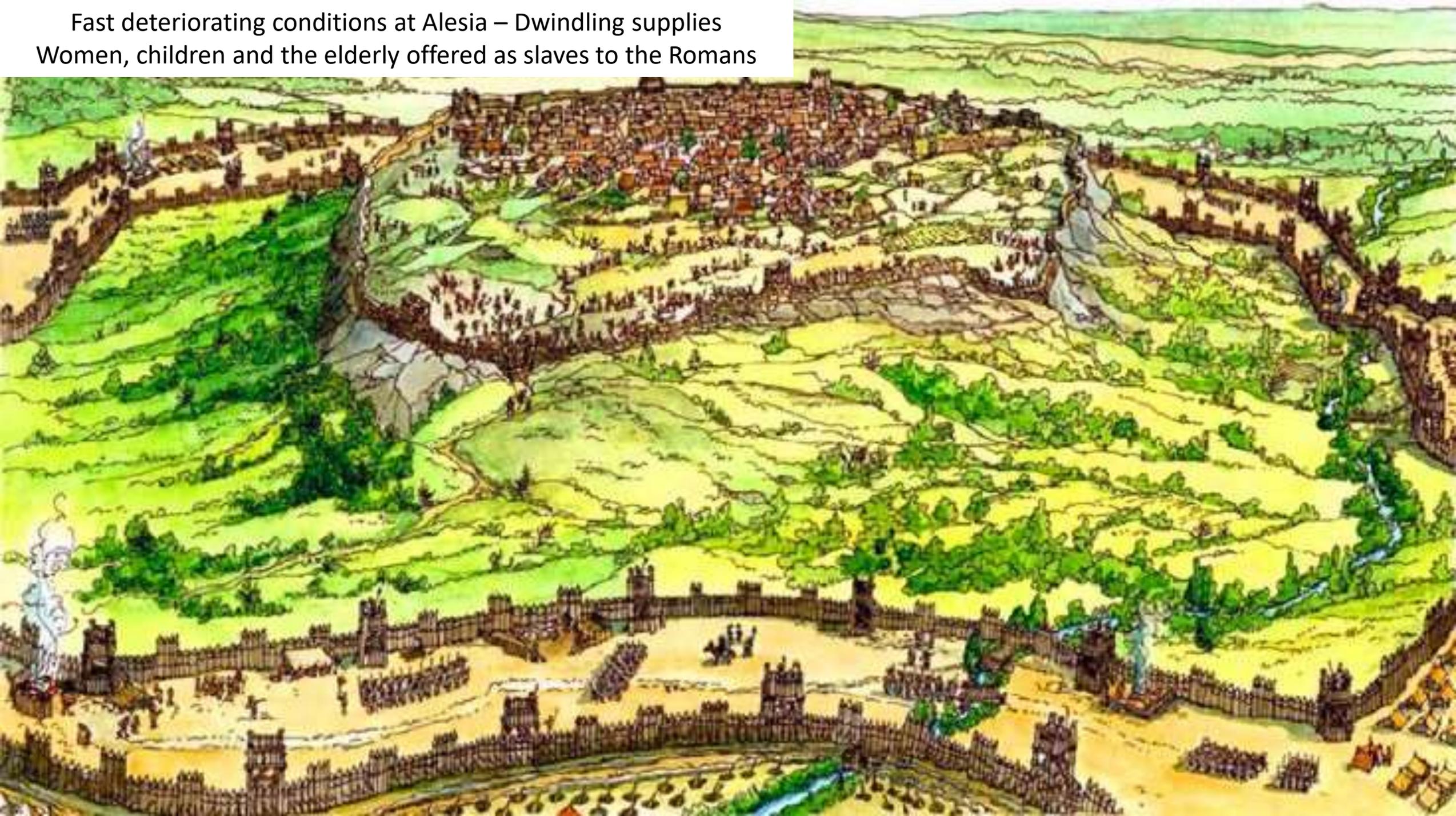


## Building lines of **circumvallation** to surround Alesia





Fast deteriorating conditions at Alesia – Dwindling supplies  
Women, children and the elderly offered as slaves to the Romans





Early October 52 BC

The massive Gallic relief army fast approaching

Second stage of Vercingetorix's plan at hand: to attack the besieging Romans from both sides

Romans vastly outnumbered

# GREAT ENIGMAS IN HISTORY





## The final clash

### The opposing armies:

**Caesar:** 12 legions (60 000 men)

German cavalry in hiding

**Vercingetorix:** 60 000 men in Alesia

250 000 men (relief army) but only  
60 000 elite warriors

**Caesar:** one of the  
greatest tacticians and  
strategists

What about Vercingetorix?

Sound military judgment

The adoption of Roman techniques  
of warfare

Logistics warfare against Caesar's  
legions

Disparate tribes vs. **professional**,  
well-organized legions





## The Gauls

**Individualistic** approach to warfare

Obsessed with **prestige**

(demonstrating prowess to their peers)

Tribes leaders competing against each others

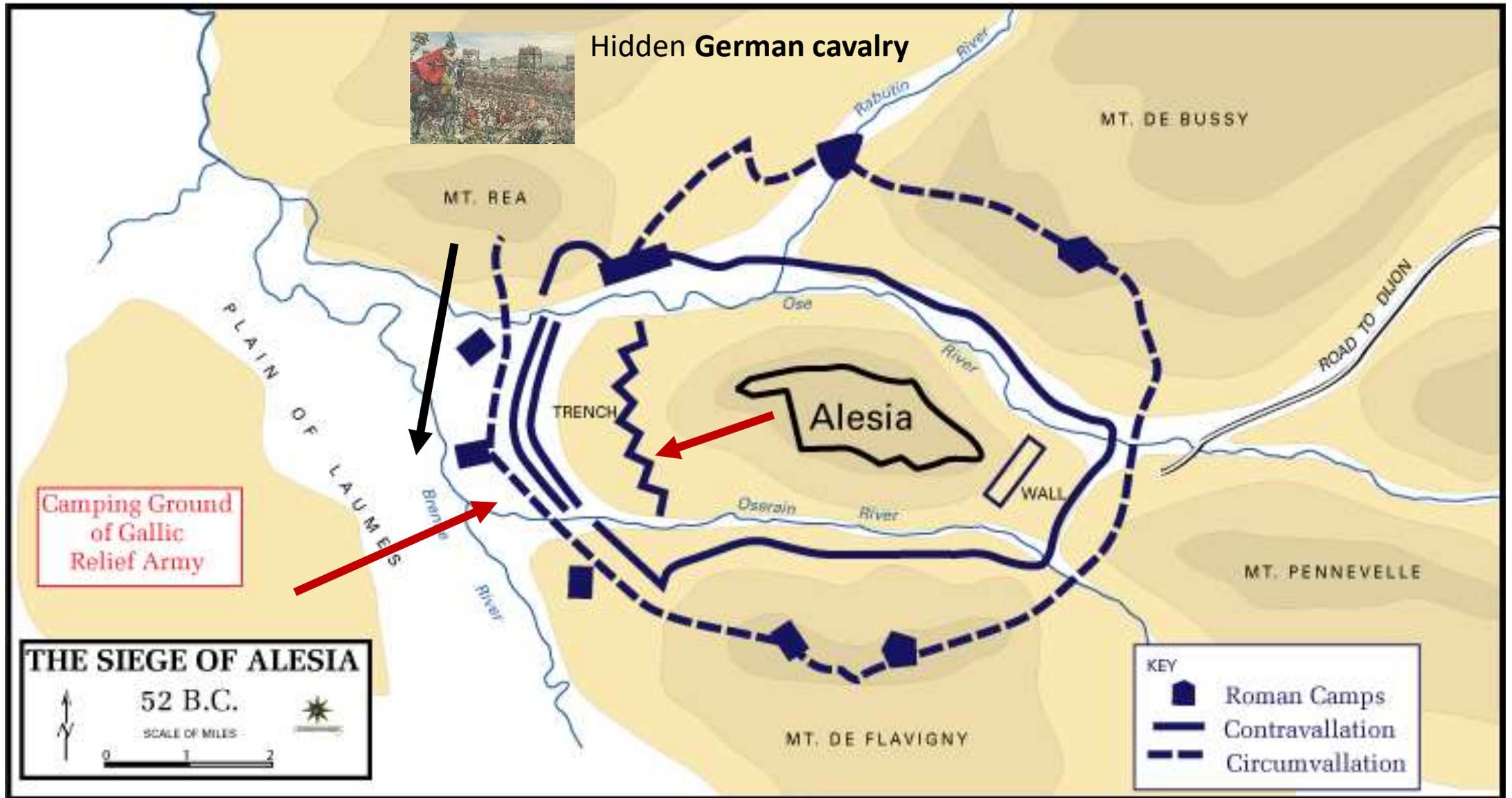
Difficult to control such an army



## The Gauls

**Inferior** weapons in quantity and quality

**Poor tacticians:** launching assaults against Roman lines of defense



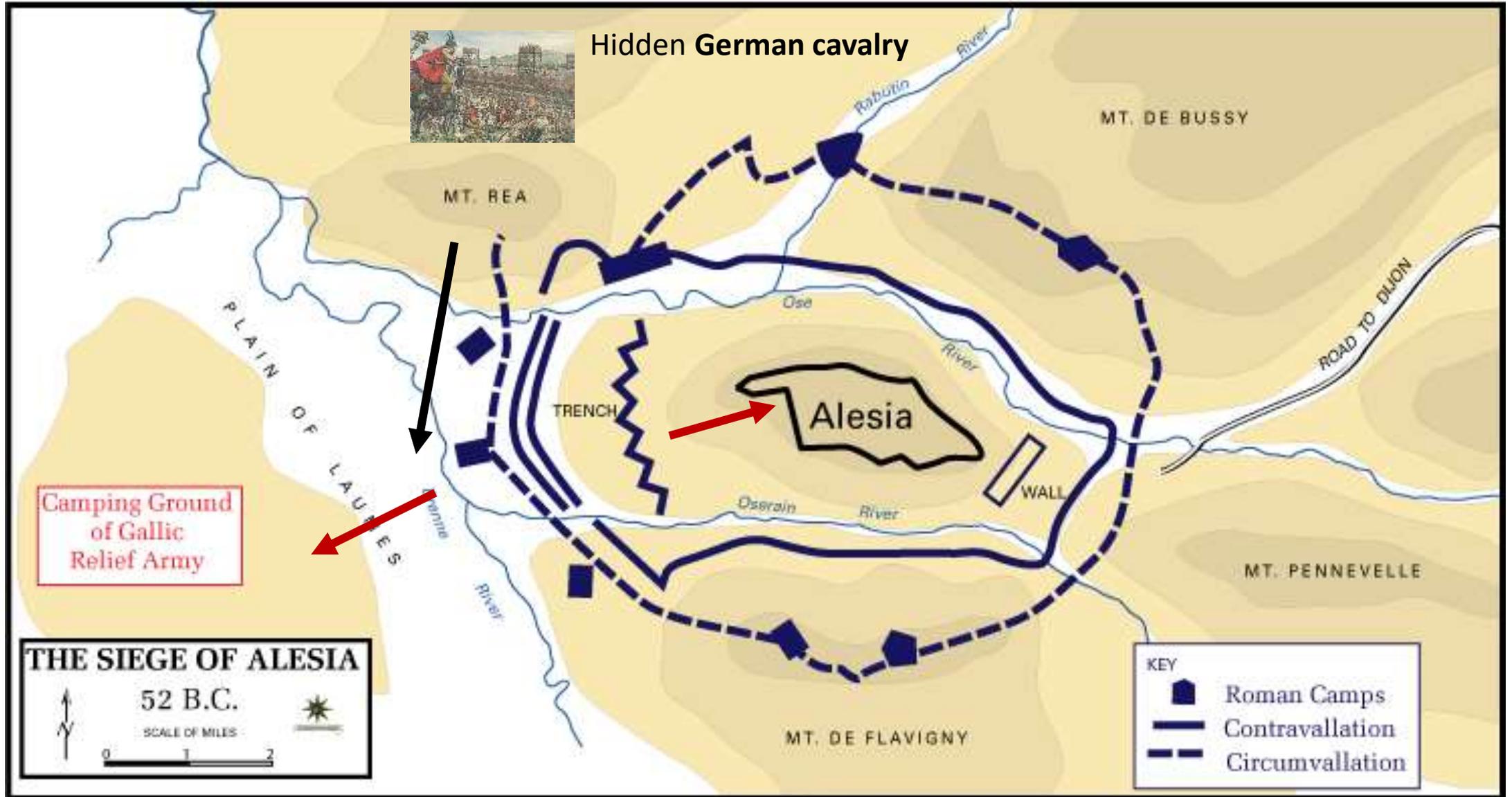
Hidden German cavalry



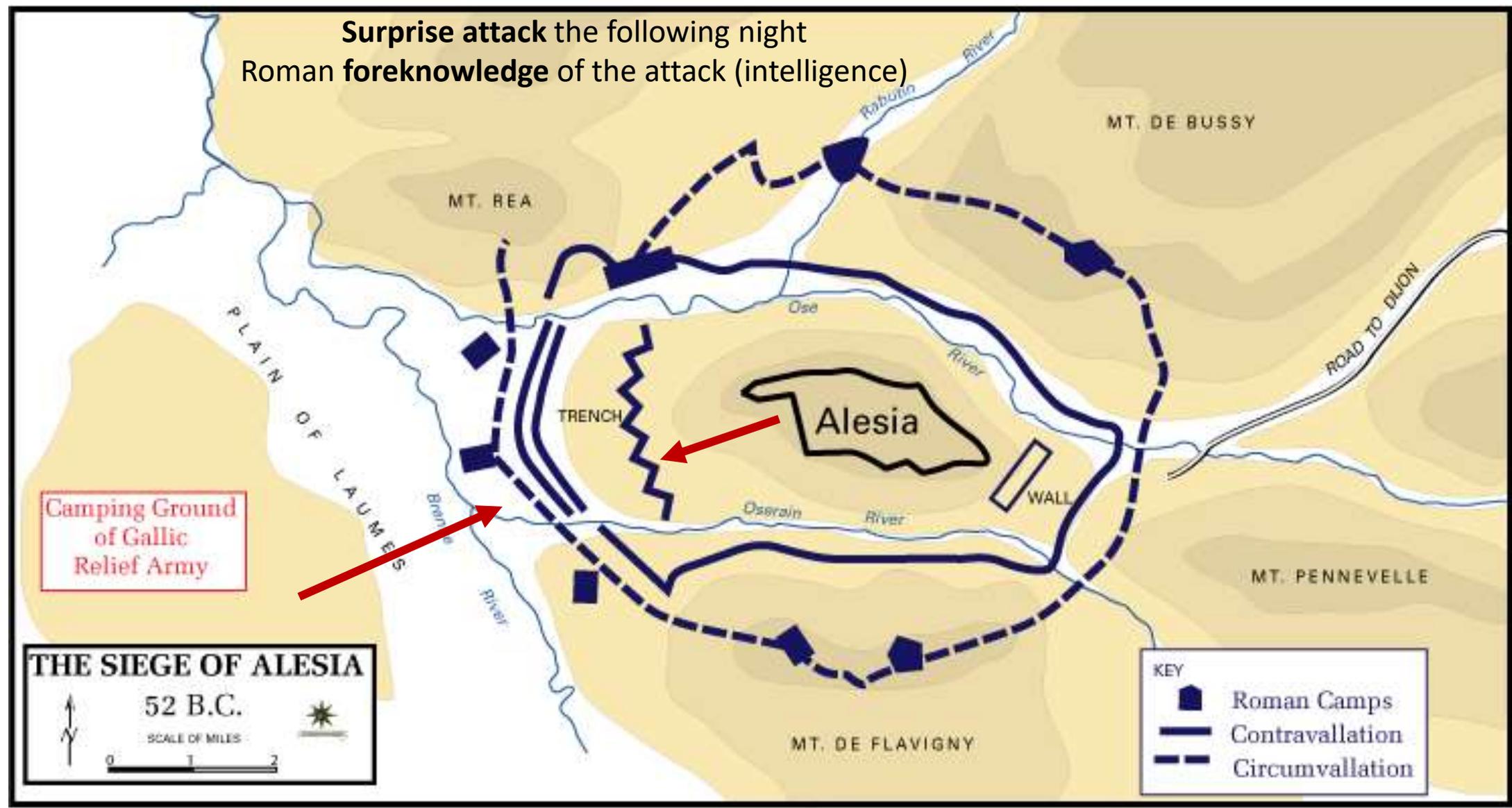
Camping Ground of Gallic Relief Army

KEY  
 ■ Roman Camps  
 — Contravallation  
 - - Circumvallation

THE SIEGE OF ALESIA  
 52 B.C.  
 SCALE OF MILES  
 0 1 2



Surprise attack the following night  
Roman foreknowledge of the attack (intelligence)



**THE SIEGE OF ALESIA**  
52 B.C.  
SCALE OF MILES  
0 1 2

KEY

- Roman Camps
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- Circumvallation





## The legions in trouble

Repeated attacks against Roman fortified lines

Caesar's conundrum: retreat? Or **counter-attack?**

Caesar rallied his exhausted troops

The sudden appearance of the Roman cavalry: defining moment

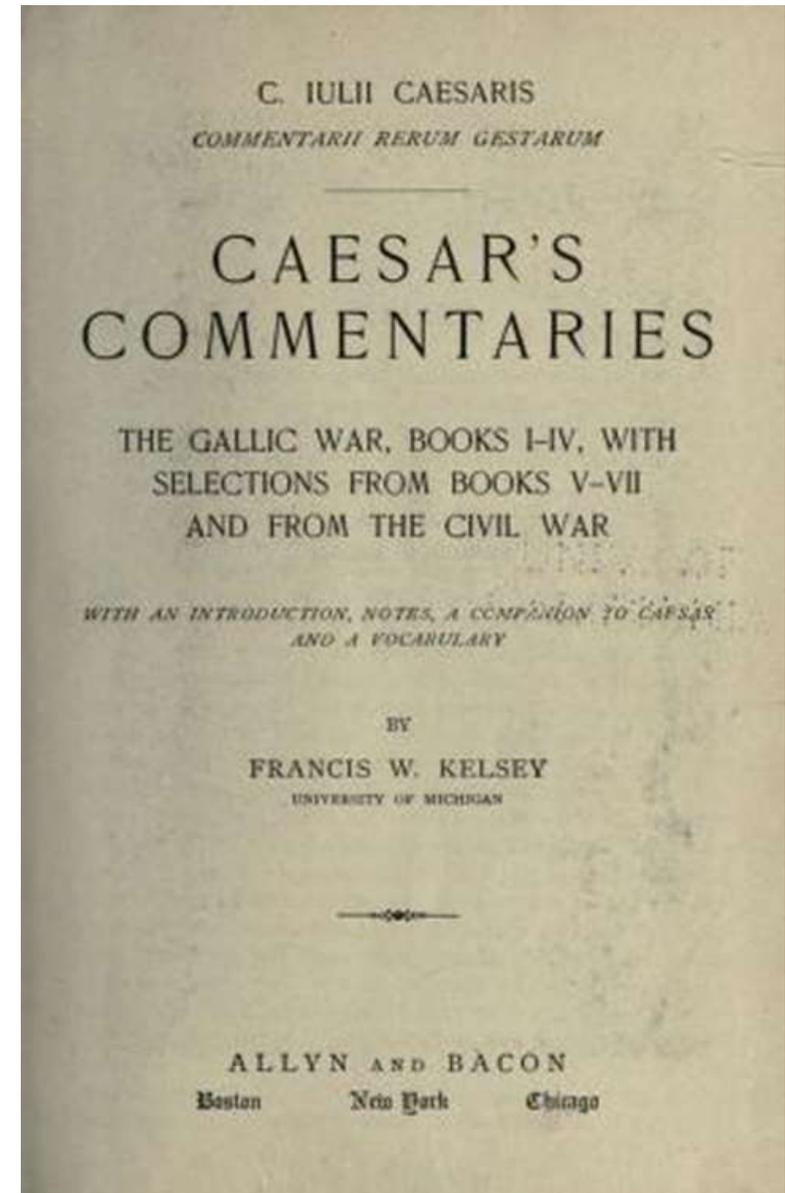


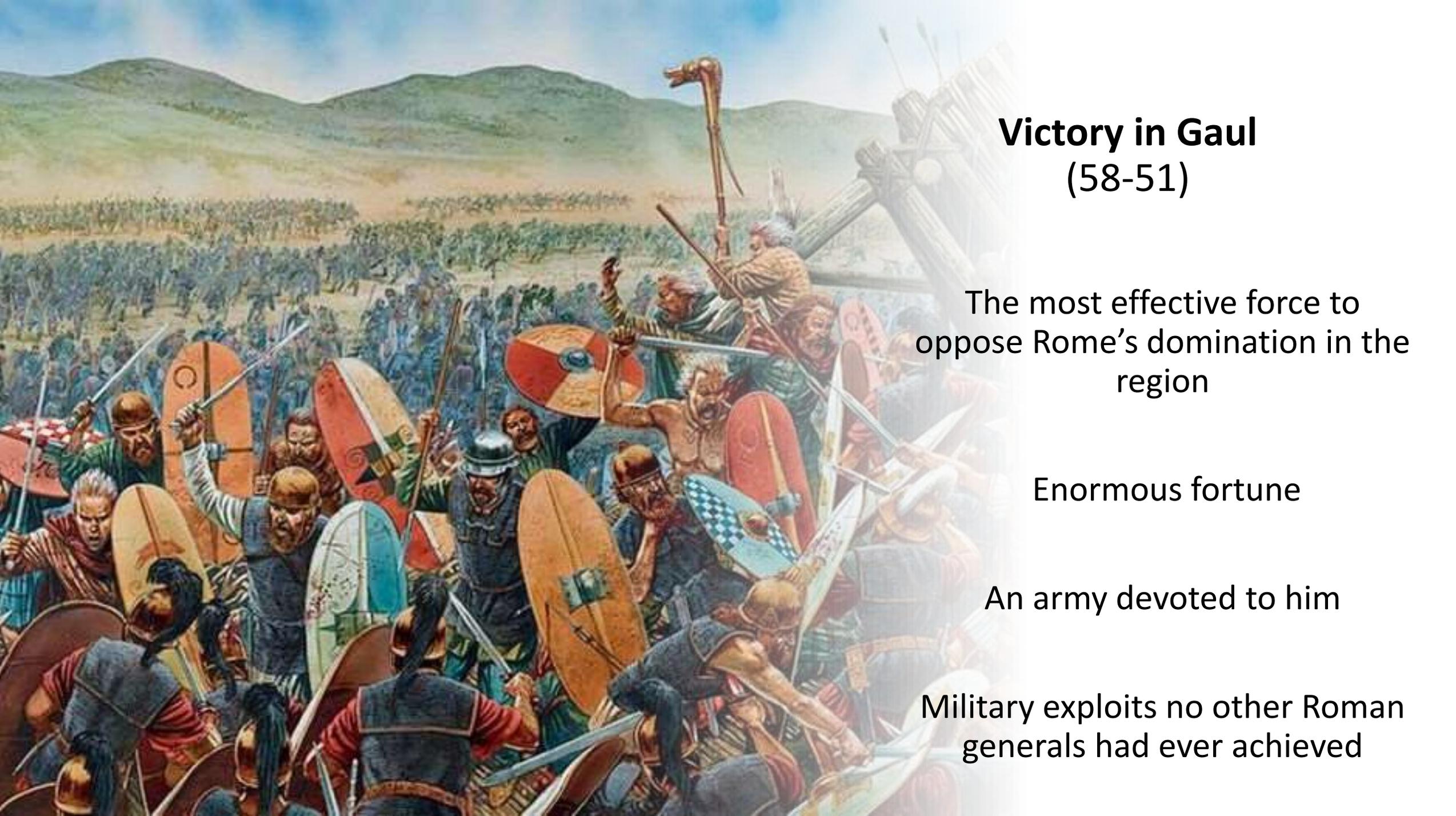
# Caesar: the importance of Alesia

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**20 chapters!**

Vercingetorix's major diplomatic victory:  
to unite Gallic tribes under his  
leadership





## Victory in Gaul (58-51)

The most effective force to  
oppose Rome's domination in the  
region

Enormous fortune

An army devoted to him

Military exploits no other Roman  
generals had ever achieved



A 20-day *supplicatio*  
ordered by the Senate

A **thanksgiving** ceremony

20 days: a timeframe never  
granted to anybody before  
Caesar





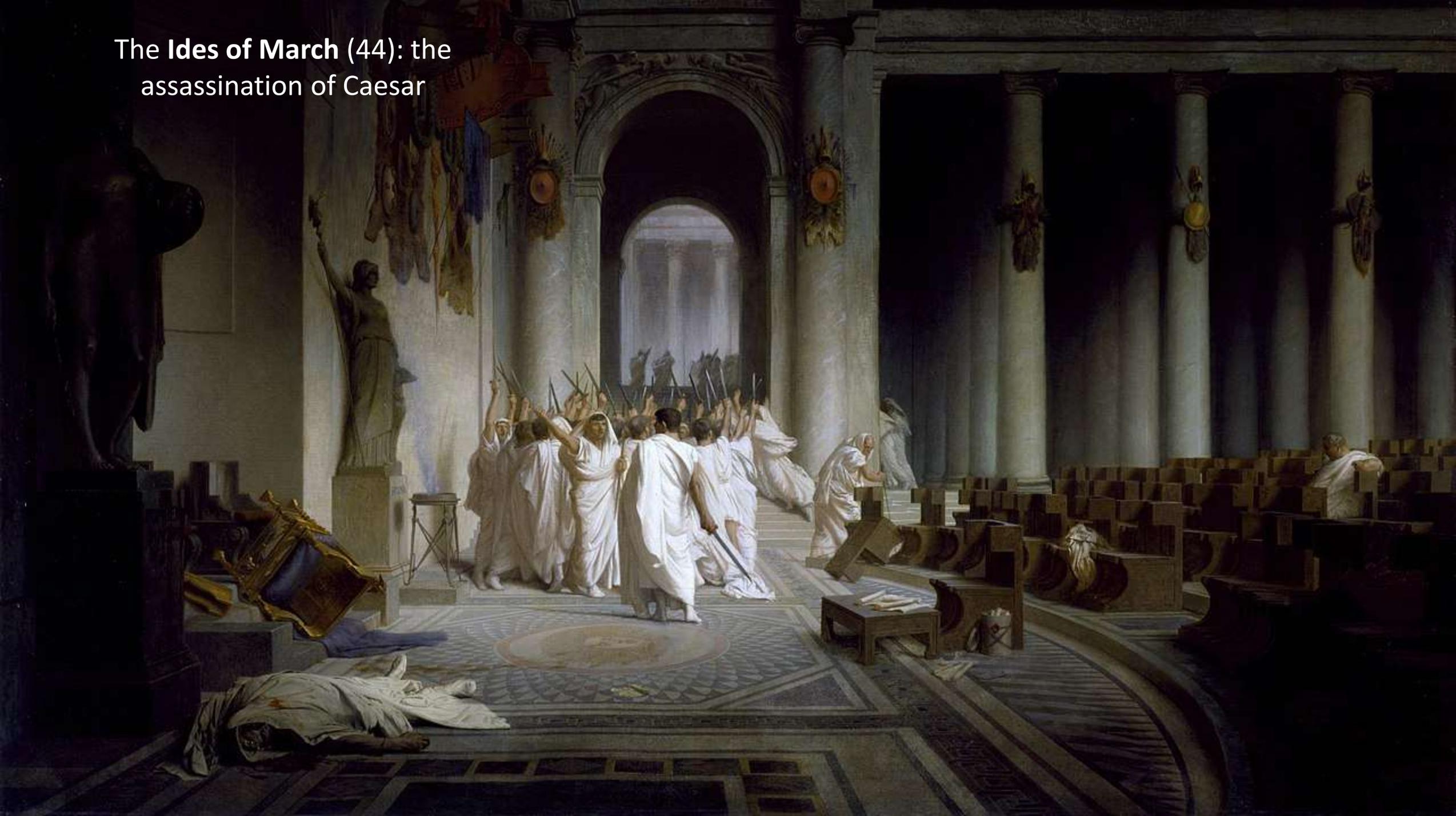


Caesar's name became synonymous of absolute power

Elected *Dictator* for life

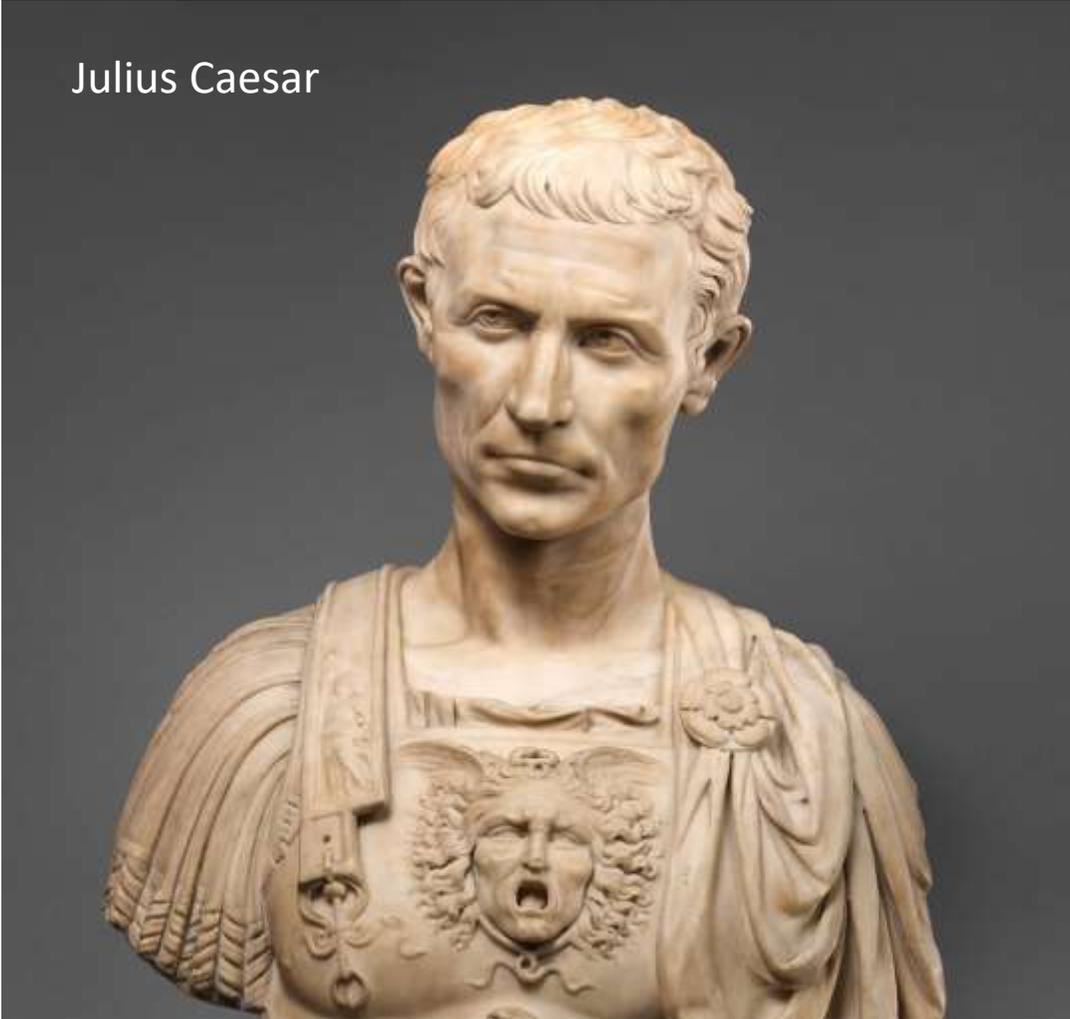
A monarch without the title

The Ides of March (44): the  
assassination of Caesar



## Caesar's victory: an enigma

Julius Caesar



Vercingetorix





# The last battle: victory at hand for the Gauls

Some tribes failed to engage the Romans and left the battlefield

collines de Mussy-la-fosse

Camping ground of Gallic Army of Relief



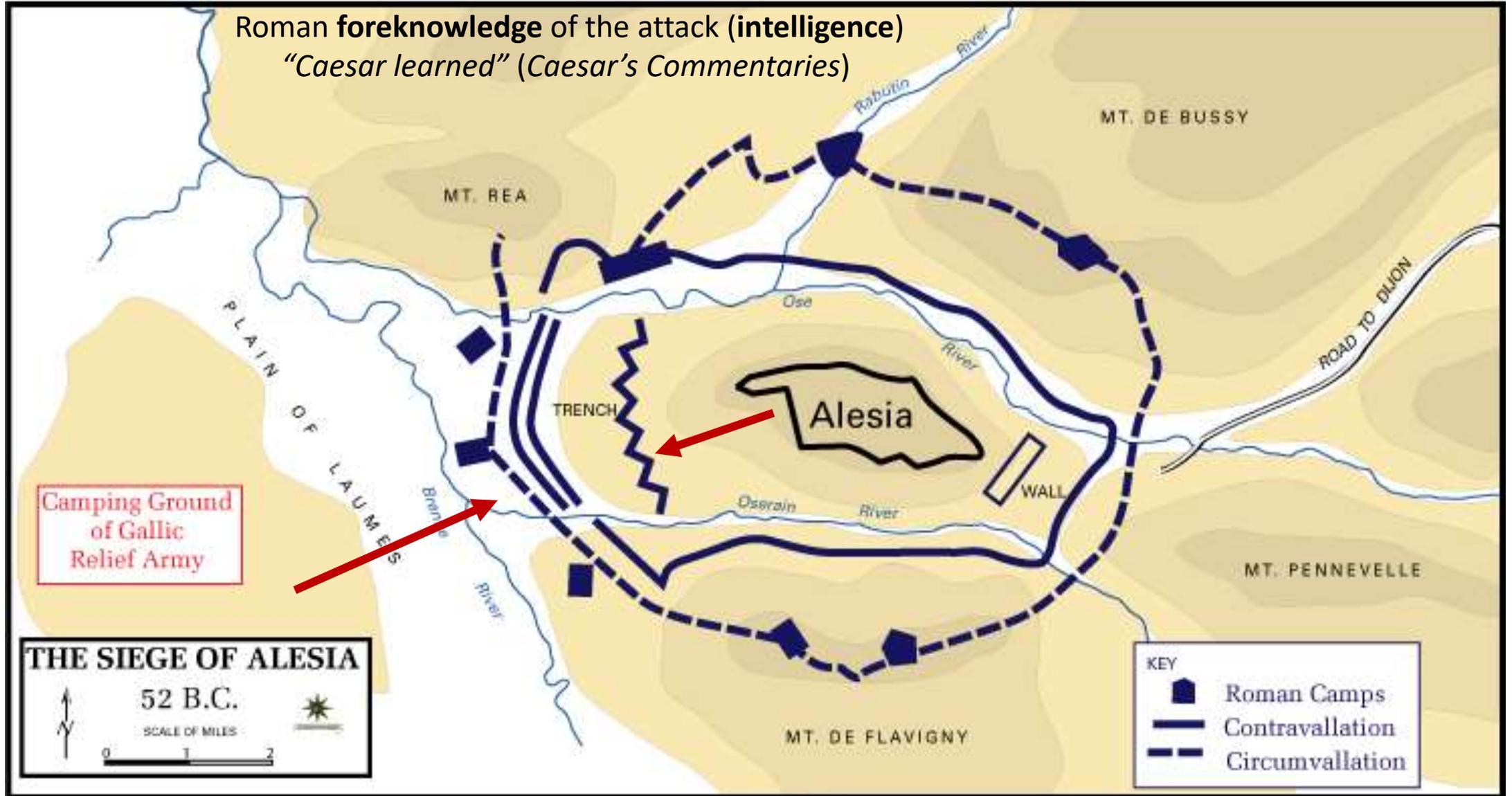
Commius, Viridomarus,



- A** Roman camps
- D** Roman camp at foot of Mont Réa



Roman **foreknowledge** of the attack (**intelligence**)  
"Caesar learned" (*Caesar's Commentaries*)



Camping Ground  
of Gallic  
Relief Army

### THE SIEGE OF ALESIA

52 B.C.

SCALE OF MILES



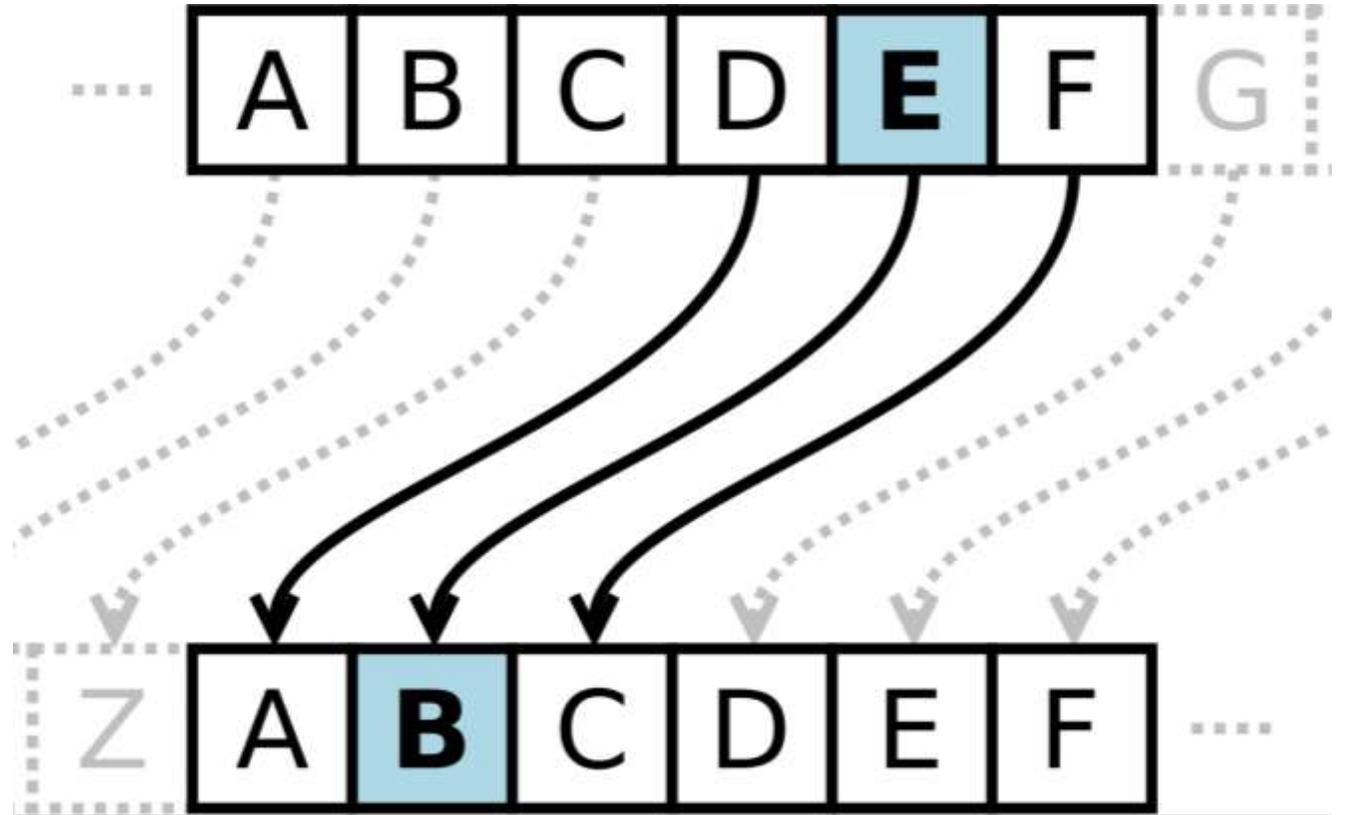
KEY

-  Roman Camps
-  Contravallation
-  Circumvallation



Planted “assets” within Gallic ranks

**Caesar’s cipher (code):** shifting three letters (Greek alphabet) to the left



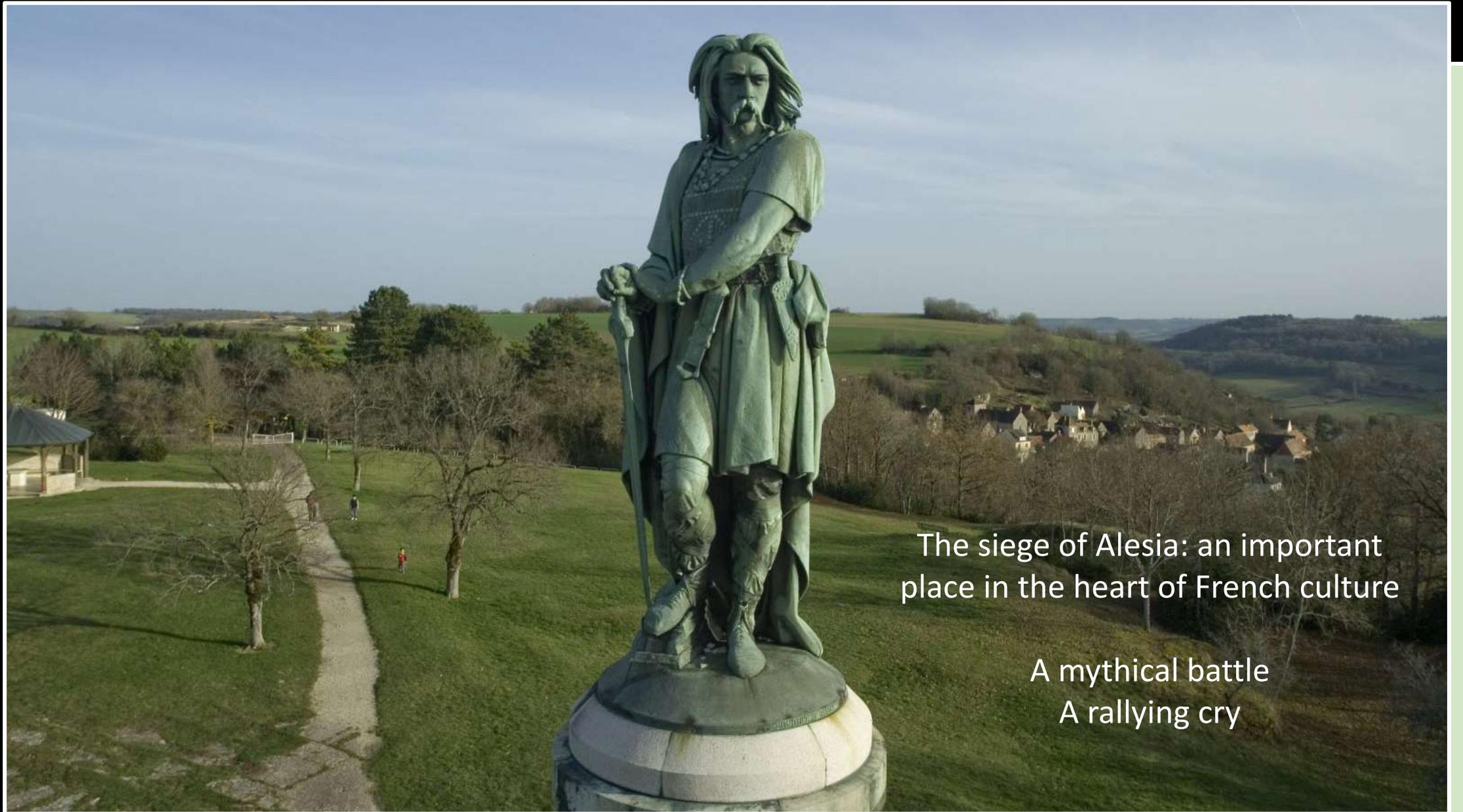
One letter or group of letters  
=

Another letter or group of letters according to a  
**prearranged pattern**

The practice of **concealing** a message (**steganography**)

Steganography: *steganos* (covered or concealed) + *graphia* (writing)





The siege of Alesia: an important place in the heart of French culture

A mythical battle  
A rallying cry



## The enlightenment

The Gauls as the people who inhabited the territory that became France

The official version until 1789: the nobility as descendant of Frankish conquerors

The idea of nation (the majority to have a say...)



*“The Napoleonic idea aims to **rebuild** the French society upended by fifty years of revolution, to **reconcile** order and freedom, the rights of the people and the principles of authority”*

Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte (1840)



## From president to emperor

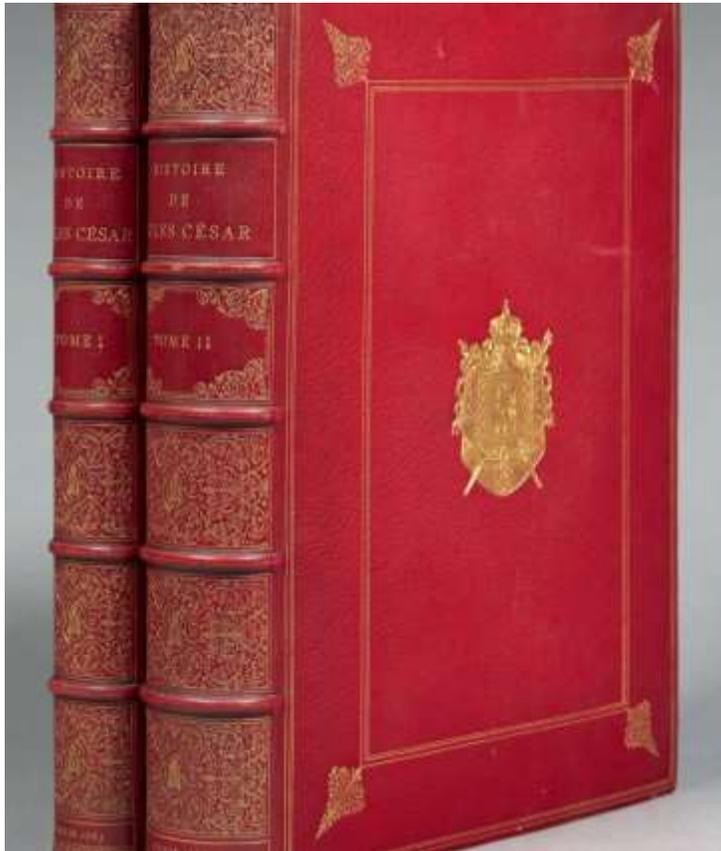
2 December 1851: a **coup d'état**

2 December 1852 (the anniversary of Napoleon's coronation) : the re-establishment of the Empire

His model: Caesar



1862: Napoleon III published a **History of Julius Caesar**



No coincidence

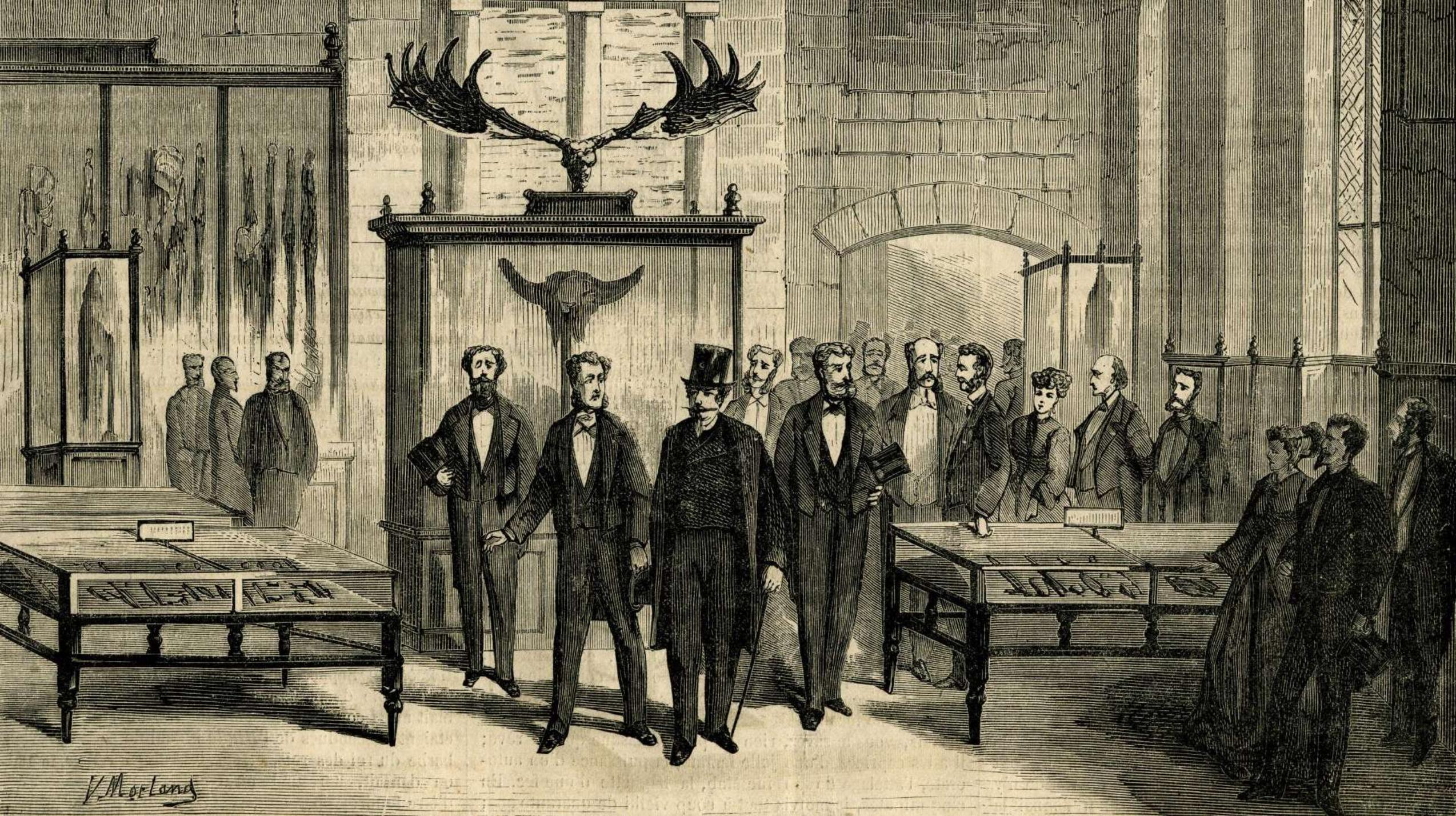
A reference to Caesar the **conqueror**

Caesar who established his **absolute political power** with the agreement of the people

Caesar who brought modernity to the Gallic world  
The myth of a *“Gallic-Roman”* civilization

***National Museum of Archeology***  
(inaugurated in 1867)

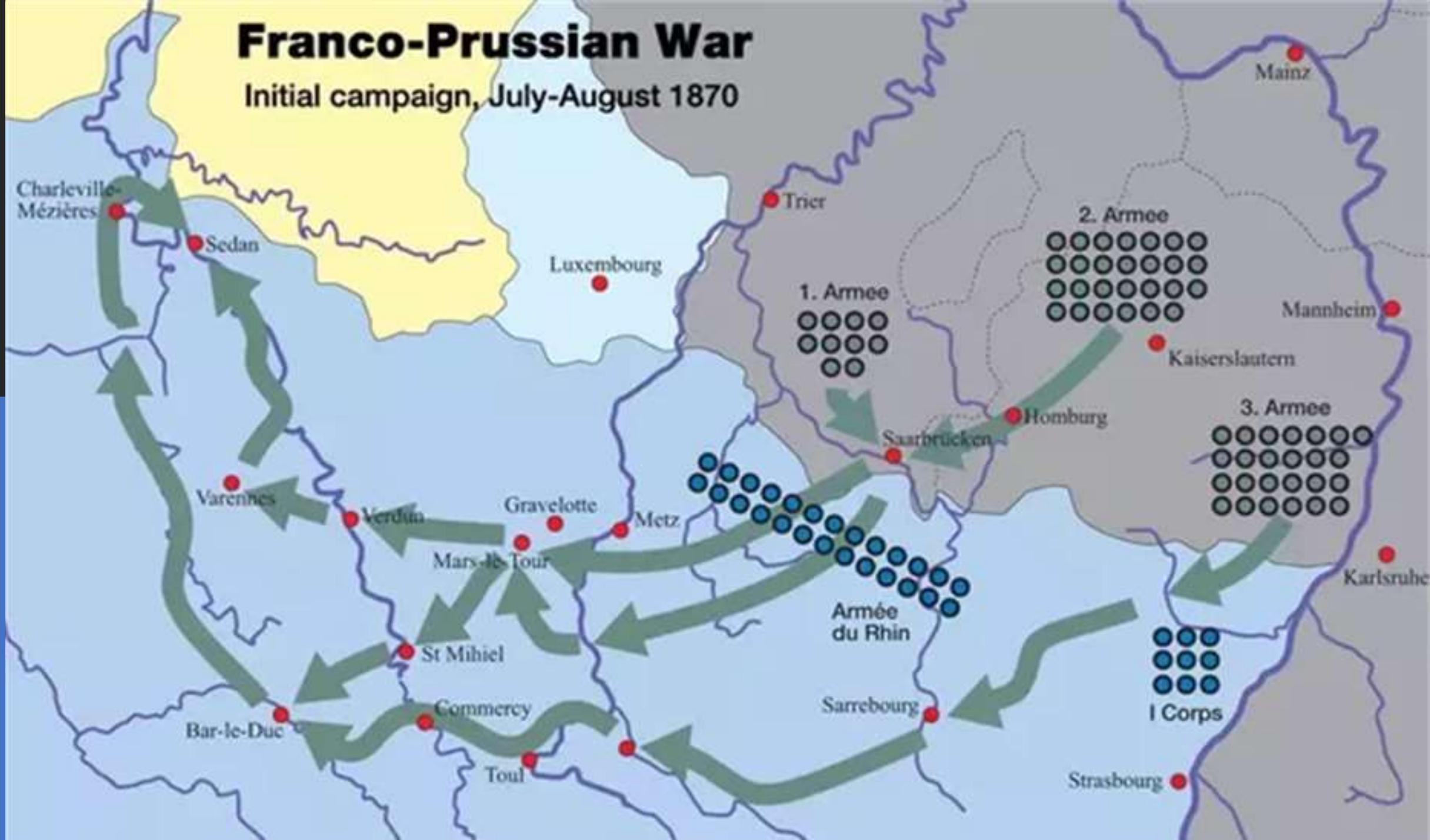




V. Morland

# Franco-Prussian War

Initial campaign, July-August 1870





*Announcement of the abolition of the imperial regime by Jules Didier & Jacques Guiaud*





19 September 1870: Paris  
besieged and bombarded

4-month resistance  
Paris deprived of food supplies  
Cold winter + starvation

The Prussians: merciless enemies  
The Gauls as patriots who fought  
another merciless foe to defend  
their country and values

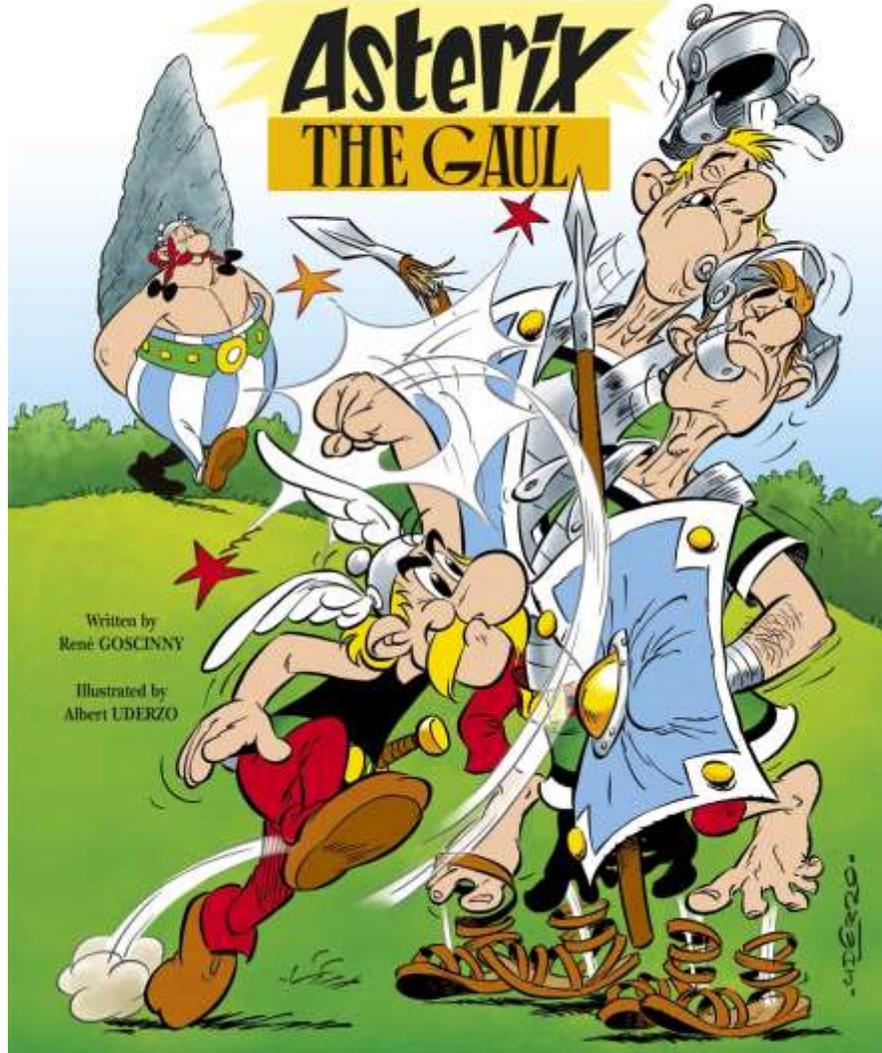


May-June 1940  
France's defeat



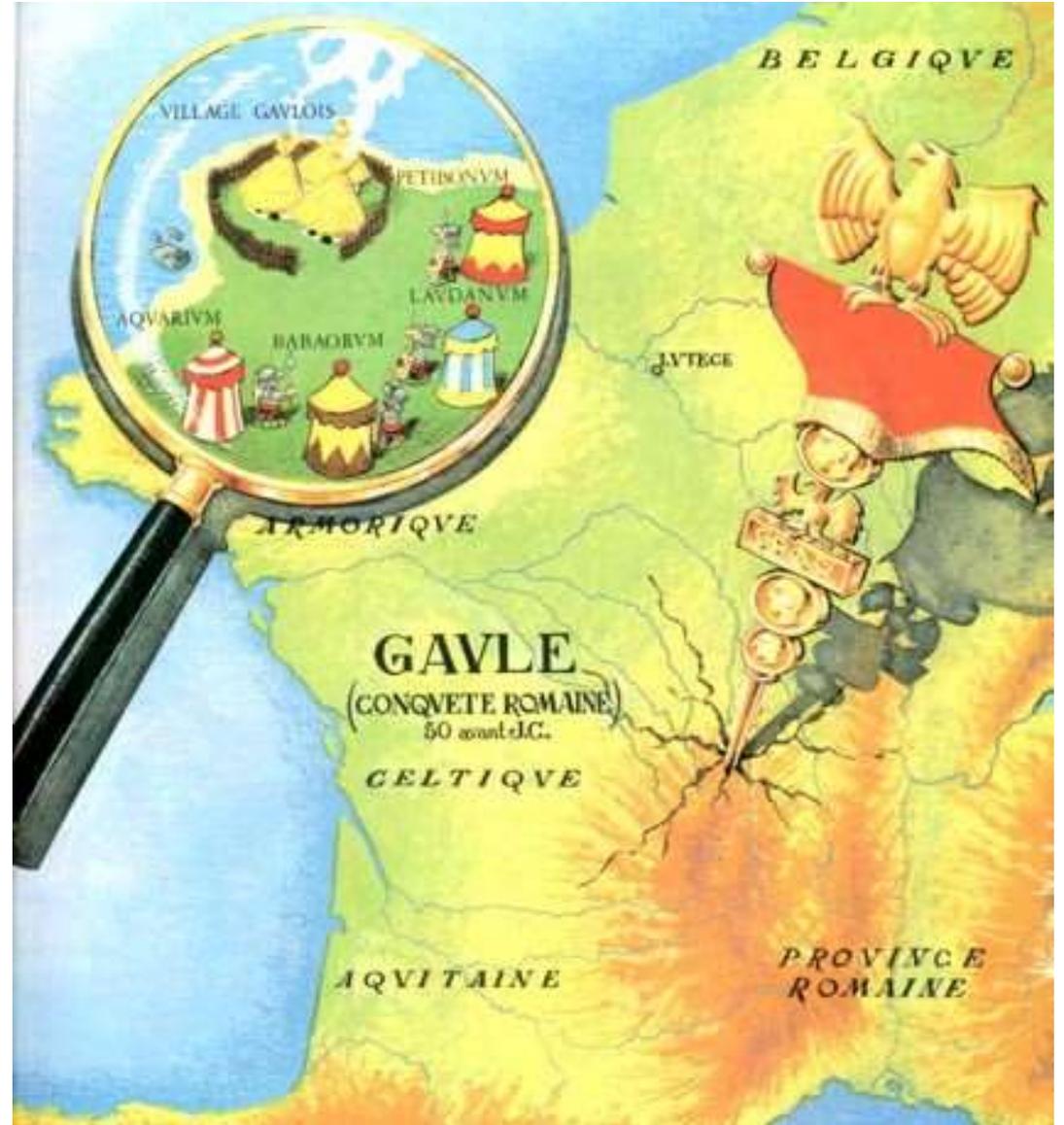
R. GOSCINNY *Asterix* A. UDERZO

# Asterix THE GAUL



Written by  
René GOSCINNY

Illustrated by  
Albert UDERZO





CHIEFS LIKE VERGINGETORIX  
HAD TO LAY THEIR ARMS AT  
CAESAR'S FEET ...

OUCH!

CLANG!

