

CHARLES DE GAULLE AND ANCIENT HISTORY

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Abstract: *General de Gaulle is known for his passion for French and European history. French historical figures from the Middle Ages, the Modern era and the 19th century are sometimes associated with him. However, Charles de Gaulle was a man with a very broad cultural background and a passion for ancient history. This greatly influenced his thinking, his writing style and his perception of certain countries and peoples. Greco-Roman history and literature had a profound influence on him, and this article analyses this in greater detail.*

Keywords: *Charles de Gaulle, reception of Antiquity, France, 20th century*

Famous for leading the *France Libre* and the fight against Nazism during the Second World War, then for founding the Fifth French Republic, Charles de Gaulle (1890-1970) was a man steeped in historical culture. Heir to a royalist Catholic family upbringing and a very particular relationship with history under the Third Republic (Jackson, 2019, p. 39), he is generally associated with great historical figures that he was particularly fond of, such as Joan of Arc and Napoleon Bonaparte. Charles de Gaulle often evoked medieval and modern history. It is these associations that the press and the general public - but sometimes historians too (Agulhon, 1997) - usually attribute to him. Nevertheless, General de Gaulle showed a definite interest in ancient history in his speeches and accounts. His library contains a vast collection of ancient Greek and Roman authors (Larcen, 2003, pp. 802-803). When he visited Iran in 1963, he paid a vibrant tribute to the Persian history he considered so glorious in the first millennium BC. When he was a commander in Syria, he deplored the “laziness” of the locals, who had inherited a great history (above all medieval, but not only). In Europe, he likes to recall the greatness of the Roman Empire, the legacy of Greco-Roman philosophy and the positive role played by the dictatorships of the Roman Republic in re-establishing republican order and security. It is this powerful yet little-known relationship between General de Gaulle and ancient history that we will explore through three themes: the General’s classical culture, his fantasized vision of a glorious East, and the use of Greco-Roman military history to defend his project to modernize the French army.

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A man steeped in classical culture

Charles de Gaulle was strongly influenced by his classical education in the Catholic school system and with his teacher father, even though he belonged to the first generation to see Latin and Greek timidly begin to recede from the French collège curriculum. Indeed, when he entered secondary school in 1902, the government of Émile Combes implemented a reform introducing a Latin-free stream. This represented a veritable educational revolution, since Latin had originally been a compulsory part of nineteenth-century French public education, as well as a social marker (Lintilhac, 1913). The 1902 reform considered that most French people didn't need the dead languages of Latin and Greek to do their jobs and contribute to colonization, but that it was a good idea to keep Latin and Greek for the elite (Hery, 2016, pp. 31-33). There are four sections: one without Latin/Greek, one with Latin/Sciences, one with Latin/Living Languages and one with Latin/Greek. De Gaulle joined the Latin/Greek section at middle school. He thus acquired a very classical culture, while most of his contemporaries had less (or no) humanities training.

Contrary to Maurice Agulhon's assertion in 1997, we now know what de Gaulle thought "about the history of classical antiquity" (Agulhon, 1997, p. 4). Malraux admired him and made numerous references to classical Greek and Roman authors in his letters and works. He was particularly fond of quoting Virgil (as Malraux points out in *Les chênes qu'on abat*). From his earliest youth to the end of his life, de Gaulle took great pleasure in recalling classical Greek quotations in his notebooks. For example, when taken prisoner by the Germans in 1916, the young Captain de Gaulle recalled the history and geography of classical Greece in his prison notebooks (De Gaulle, 2010a, pp. 267-272). In 1967, he wrote in a note that Sophocles had written his last tragedy (*Œdipe à Colone*) at the age of 89, not concealing his hope that he would be able to write his memoirs until such an advanced age (De Gaulle, 2010c, p. 1184). In his little notebooks, he also quotes many Latin phrases. He developed a kind of reflex to it, due to his training: several witnesses mention the fact that he often replied in Latin in discussions where his interlocutors had fun declaiming Latin quotations (Druon, 1990). There is also a clear influence in the style and form of De Gaulle's writings. In addition to the somewhat Latin expressions and formulas he might use, such as "ultime raison" and "loi d'airain", he sometimes took almost literal translations of Latin authors in his writings (Larcan, 2003, p. 98).

General de Gaulle was so impressed by classical culture that he came to regard it as an absolute prerequisite for the training of French officers. In 1934, for example, in his book *Vers l'armée de métier* (Towards a Professional Army), he wrote that general culture - in which classical culture played a prominent role - was a veritable "school of command" (De Gaulle, 1971b, p. 238). Such was his conviction that he attributed Alexander the Great's victories to his Aristotelian education: "There was not an illustrious captain who did not have a taste for and a feeling for the heritage of the human spirit. In the depths of Alexander's

victories, we always find Aristotle”² (De Gaulle, 1971b, p. 239). This is hardly surprising, given that Aristotelianism was very present in the education and rhetoric of the young Charles (Herman, 2005, p. 11). Likewise, it was through the prism of ancient historians that General de Gaulle adopted to mark the beginning of French history. In a handwritten text probably written around September 1938 for the publication of *La France et son armée*, he considers that “France” (the Gauls) enters history with the sack of Rome by the Celtic Brennus (De Gaulle, 2010a, p. 865).

General de Gaulle also drew inspiration from Julius Caesar in his *Mémoires de guerre* and *Mémoires d’espoir*, and from Tacitus in his writing style. For example, when de Gaulle paints a portrait of Marshal Pétain in his *Mémoires de guerre*, we are astonished to note that he repeats word for word Tacitus’ portrait of General Mucian (*Histoires*, I, 10; Mucian was close to the Flavians’ dynasty). As Malraux already noted, *Mémoires de guerre* and *Mémoires d’espoir* are a classic reworking of the war stories written by warlords in ancient Rome and classical Greece, who recount their experiences from a deceptively outsider’s point of view. The best-known examples, which de Gaulle read extensively in his youth, are Julius Caesar’s *Gallic War* and Xenophon’s *Anabasis*. De Gaulle was mocked by his contemporaries for his stilted literary style, his bombastic vocabulary and his tendency to sometimes speak of himself in the third person; but in reality, in his mind, this was merely a reworking of a model - perhaps a form of homage - that of the ancient texts of former generals he admired (Herman, 2005). Nor should we forget that Charles de Gaulle’s thinking was heavily influenced by ancient authors. This explains why his contemporaries repeatedly placed him in a Greco-Roman posture. Some poked fun at his bombastic phrasing, calling him a Latin in the French language. Roland Barthe, for example, mockingly declares that the France described by de Gaulle in his books and speeches is “just about as unusual as Plutarch’s Greece” (*Le Monde*, December 25, 2010). More admiringly, Malraux spoke of “a kind of Oedipus whose Sophocles would tell us how he wanted to make Thebes against the Thebans” (Malraux, 1971).³

A fantasized Orient

General de Gaulle’s literary and philosophical culture also helped shape his fantasized vision of the Orient. In his *Mémoires de guerres*, he wrote the now famous but often misunderstood sentence: “towards the complicated Orient, I fly with simple ideas” (De Gaulle, 2016, p. 110)⁴. In fact, General de Gaulle’s “simple ideas” did not concern his vision of the East, but the objectives he set for

² “Pas un illustre capitaine qui n’eût le goût et le sentiment du patrimoine de l’esprit humain. Au fond des victoires d’Alexandre on retrouve toujours Aristote.” Cette traduction et les suivantes sont réalisées par l’auteur de cet article.

³ “Une sorte d’Œdipe dont un Sophocle nous dirait comment il a voulu faire Thèbes contre les Thébains”.

⁴ “Vers l’Orient compliqué, je m’envole avec des idées simples”.

himself as part of the Syrian campaign of 1941. General de Gaulle's "complicated Orient" was a misinterpretation of Western complexities - struggles between the Petainists and Gaullists, Franco-British rivalries, the threat of a Nazi presence to support the putsch that had taken place shortly beforehand in Iraq, the reluctance of the United States in the operation to "recover" the French mandates in the Middle East by the Free French Forces - to the territory it is visiting.

However, this quotation provides an excellent opening for analysing General de Gaulle's perception of the Orient. Having never served in the colonial army, he had many fantasies about this region, which he knew only from history books and literature. In the eyes of the man of 18 June, the Near and Middle East is a crucial ancient space for humanity that has gradually deteriorated with varying degrees of violence. He complained a great deal about the supposed degeneration of the Mashreq and regretted its incredible past. Indeed, in November 1929, de Gaulle was posted to the Staff of the Troupes du Levant in Beirut, where he was in charge of the 2nd and 3rd offices (military intelligence and operations). Accompanied by his family, he stayed there until January 1932 (*L'Orient-Le Jour*, 18 June 2015). He carried out several missions in Aleppo, Damascus, Homs, Palmyra, etc. In June 1930, he took part in a "pacification" expedition to the predominantly Kurdish territories of north-eastern Syria. In a letter to his father dated 7 July 1930, he expressed his emotion at having reached the Tigris on behalf of France:

The other day, we occupied the "Bec de Canard" (Duck's Beak), which the Turks were going to give back to us on the banks of the Tigris, without a fight. I went there with the general and we dipped our hands in the river, not without some emotion. It was, I think, the first time in history that French soldiers had gone there armed. The Crusaders, it is true, had gone as far as Diarbékir [sic, Diyarbakir]⁵ (De Gaulle, 2010a, p. 730).

For de Gaulle, Syria and Lebanon were an immensely important land for humanity. It was one of the cradles of humanity and of ancient civilisations, which continued to develop until the end of the Middle Ages. However, in his correspondence with his parents, de Gaulle complained about the laziness of the locals. Unlike the Lebanese, the Syrians had become lazy, thinking only of easy money to feed themselves and stroll around, as he wrote to his mother on 11 December 1929:

An innumerable and calamitous plebeian fill everything and runs on all sides. Everyone's preoccupation is to earn as soon as possible and by whatever means possible the few pennies necessary and sufficient to buy a cake, olives and a cup of coffee. After that, there's nothing to do but stroll around until the next day. [...] This country, including the desert, is magnificent and would become as fertile as it

5 "Nous avons l'autre jour occupé sans coup férir le "Bec de Canard" que nous rétrocéderaients les Turcs en bordure du Tigre. J'y étais allé avec le général et nous avons trempé nos mains dans ce fleuve, non sans quelque émotion. C'était, je pense, la première fois dans l'histoire que des soldats français y allaient en armes. Les Croisés, il est vrai, avaient poussé jusqu'à Diarbékir [sic, Diyarbakir]"

once was if people took the trouble to cultivate it and provided the current security situation continues⁶ (De Gaulle, 2010a, p. 726).

Writing to Lieutenant-Colonel Émile Mayer on 30 June 1930, he went even further in this deplorable view of the population by invoking the presumed ancient history of the Near East: “It’s true that we’ve adopted the worst system for taking action in this country, which is to encourage people to stand up for themselves, even if it means encouraging them to do so, whereas nothing has ever been achieved here - not the Nile canals, not the Palmyra aqueduct, not a Roman road, not an olive grove - without coercion.”⁷ (De Gaulle, 2010a, p. 728) As De Gaulle admired the empire of the Umayyads and the Baghdad Caliphate, medieval history certainly permeated his mind more than ancient history when speaking of the region’s history (Figeac, 2022, p. 155). However, as these examples show, he also had in mind the image of a land with a very powerful past, the original cradle of the Phoenicians who influenced the Greeks and founded Carthage, the great rival of Rome, or Hannibal, the illustrious general “destined for great undertakings” whom he linked to his Phoenician origins (De Gaulle, 2010a, p. 383); an area that he also links to Greco-Roman history, as he did in his speech at the prize-giving ceremony at Saint Joseph’s University in Beirut, when he said that “Hellenism” and “Roman strength” had endured in the region thanks to “a passion for an ideal” (De Gaulle, 2010a, p. 729).

Iran is an even more interesting case for the present subject. During the Second World War, General de Gaulle was a great supporter of the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. He visited him in November 1944 and deplored the fact that the Allies had not invited him to the Tehran conference (Bomati & Nahavandi, 2019, p. 154). He made an official diplomatic visit in October 1963 and succeeded in strengthening ties between France and Iran. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was also one of the few foreign heads of state authorised to attend General de Gaulle’s funeral in Colombey-les-Deux-Églises (*AFP*, 12 November 1970) and the only one to be received in Colombey-les-Deux-Églises a few days before his death (Senate information report no. 605 (2013-2014) submitted on 11 June 2014), proof of the esteem in which the man of 18 June held him. These links are rarely mentioned, and when they are, the recurring explanation is the Iranians’ interest in the French language and culture - the Shah and his children speak French and were brought up by French governesses; the same applies to the Iranian elite; the Empress studied in France; the Iranian civil and criminal

6 “Une plèbe innombrable et calamiteuse remplit tout et court de tous côtés. La préoccupation de tout ce monde est de gagner au plus tôt et par n’importe quel moyen les quelques sous nécessaires et suffisants pour acheter une galette, des olives et une tasse de café. Après quoi il n’y a plus qu’à flâner jusqu’au lendemain. [...] Ce pays, désert compris, est magnifique et redeviendrait aussi fertile qu’autrefois si les gens se donnaient la peine de le cultiver et pourvu que la sécurité actuelle se maintienne”.

7 “Il est vrai que pour agir nous avons adopté le pire système dans ce pays à savoir d’inciter les gens à se lever d’eux-mêmes quitte à les y encourager, alors qu’on n’a jamais rien réalisé ici, ni les canaux du Nil, ni l’aqueduc de Palmyre, ni une route romaine, ni une oliveraie, sans la contrainte”.

codes are directly inspired by their French counterparts (Bomati & Nahavandi, 2019) - and the French for Iranian oil (even though France owned only 6% of the local oil companies in 1953), as well as making Iranians literate by teaching French as a secondary language (De Gaulle, 2010c, pp. 820-821).

General de Gaulle had immense respect for the history of the Iranian people. Or rather, to use his words, the “Persian people”. Indeed, de Gaulle saw twentieth-century Iran as the direct descendant of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, for which he felt exceptional deference and fascination. When the Shah visited France in October 1961, at a time when France was suffering from a poor reputation internationally and even more so among Muslim countries as a result of the colonial wars, de Gaulle welcomed the gesture and said he wanted to achieve “a greater common effort” between two countries with a long history (Archives nationales de France AG/5(1)/1434, draft of toast to the Shah of Iran at the Élysée Palace on 11 October 1961). This opinion persisted even in the bitterness of defeat in the referendum of 27 April 1969, when he expressed his “exceptional feelings of consideration and friendship” to the Shah, who had succeeded in modernising Iran “while preserving and cultivating its traditions as old as history”⁸ (De Gaulle, 2010c, p. 1055). When de Gaulle visited Iran again on 16-20 October 1963, he asked to be allowed to visit the Senate’s archaeological museum (Fath, 2000). He gave his official speech to the Iranian Parliament just after visiting the museum. In it, he praised the Shah, heir to Cyrus I, and the Iranians, who were said to have descended directly from the Persian people. To impress him, the Shah decided to take him to visit the ruins of Persepolis. The effect was immediate: General de Gaulle surprised his hosts by wanting to visit the entire site despite his age, passionately questioning the interpreters about the meaning of the engravings he was observing (*Le Monde*, 20-21 October 1963).

Far from making him original, these examples show that General de Gaulle was immersed in a very widespread imagination in Western Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries. Representations of this particular area (the Middle East and North Africa) go back a long way and make “Orientals” the absolute opposites of “Westerners” (Europe and North America). This helps to justify a differentiated treatment of “Oriental” history and populations, often tinged with fantasies directly derived from 19th century art and literature (which itself drew inspiration from earlier works), as Edward Saïd theorised in 1978 (Saïd, 2015). Charles de Gaulle is marked by this orientalisating European culture, which imagines an unchanging space (“the immobile East”) where its inhabitants are incapable of “taking their destiny into their own hands” (Figeac, 2022, p. 154), as his readings, public statements and writings show. However, he was not always alone in (partially) reproducing Western orientalist discourse. The

8 Une opinion qui perdure même dans l’amertume de la défaite au référendum du 27 avril 1969, lorsqu’il exprime au shah ses “sentiments exceptionnels de considération et d’amitié”, lui qui a su moderniser l’Iran “tout en gardant et cultivant ses traditions aussi anciennes que l’Histoire”.

Shah of Iran shared a fantasised vision of Iran's ancient past, which he readily appropriated. In a French documentary made a few months before the fall of his regime in 1979, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi presents himself several times as the heir to the founder of the Persian empire, Cyrus the Great (émission Temps présent de la RTS. URL : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r-53ycm4XxM>). As a result, the Shah banned anti-Semitism from the public arena and pursued a soothing diplomacy towards Israel in the name of tradition: Cyrus the Great was said to have liberated the Jewish people deported to Babylon (538 BC) and encouraged them to return to Judea (Bomati & Nahavandi, 2019, p. 517). This is not surprising. For at least the last fifteen years, researchers have increasingly noted that 'Orientals' had been reappropriating Western Orientalist discourse since the nineteenth century (Pouillon & Vatin, 2011). The case of the Ottoman Empire (now Turkey) frequently comes to mind, but the case of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi is a perfect symbol of this appropriation of Orientalist discourse.

A past that helps explain the present: using the Greco-Roman example to modernise the French army between the wars

Ancient History was not only a source of literary inspiration and fascination, but also a source of strategic reflection. A great admirer of Alexander the Great, whose figure he often associated with that of the philosopher Aristotle (Larcan, 2003, p. 63), and of Julius Caesar, Charles de Gaulle sometimes tried to use the past to demonstrate the "rightness" of his opinions. This was particularly noticeable in the early 1930s, when he felt there was a growing need for a comprehensive reform of the French army.

On 1 April 1933, Major de Gaulle published a study on "the soldier of antiquity" ("le soldat de l'Antiquité") in the *Revue de l'infanterie* (De Gaulle, 1933). Right at the start of this study, he draws on ancient history to explain the importance of war in the construction of a city and a community: "the city, at its origins, lives and grows permanently"⁹. This statement is the culmination of earlier thinking. In *Le Fil de l'épée*, published in 1932, Charles de Gaulle shared Pliny the Younger's conviction that the Roman people's capacity for resistance and resilience was due to the composition of their army: peasants attached to the land and "naturally" endowed with a certain military zeal would give them a significant advantage on the battlefield (De Gaulle, 1971a). It was an idea that had long been in Charles de Gaulle's mind, appearing furtively in August 1916 in a notebook he kept as a prisoner of war. He wrote in Latin: "*ex agricultura strenuissimi milites*"¹⁰ (De Gaulle, 2010a, p. 319). In *Le Fil de l'épée*, de Gaulle argued that the French soldiers of the First World War had the same characteristics as the Roman citizen-soldiers. Because the "Poilus" were robust people, mainly from rural areas, they were able to hold out until victory.

⁹ "La cité, à ses origines, vit et grandit de façon permanente".

¹⁰ "Les soldats les plus endurants proviennent de l'agriculture".

Returning to his study of April 1933, Charles de Gaulle criticised the Greek city-states for being too focused on their tiny territory, which would have prevented them from envisaging larger expeditions; just as he felt that the Roman citizen-soldier was doomed to disappear as a model for the Roman army because it could only nurture a harmful tactical and strategic conservatism (De Gaulle, 1933) - In other words, the strength of the Roman citizen-soldier mentioned earlier would only be advantageous over short periods of conflict. General de Gaulle also had an idealised aristocratic vision of the ancient Greco-Roman troops. In his view, the more affluent a person was, the greater the risk he or she took by placing himself or herself at the front of the troops. The elite would then have a front row seat to participate and observe the battlefield; they would take risks with their men to guide them. This interpretation corresponds to Charles de Gaulle's vision of what a good officer should be on today's battlefields, and is not a relevant analysis (even for the time) of the positions occupied by Greek aristocrats.

In his study, General de Gaulle considers that the Greek armies were not very mobile, almost static, with the hoplites. The phalanx was made up of solid, coherent troops that were not very mobile, increasing the risk of being outflanked and/or surrounded. The Macedonian phalanx was the first step towards the flexibility that the Roman legions, from the time of Julius Caesar onwards, would develop even further to achieve a form of ancient perfection (De Gaulle, 1933). This development would be salutary and would explain the success of the Roman legions. What's more, the professionalisation of the Roman army between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD would provide troops with better skills - "better expertise", as he puts it - who could then adapt more quickly in the field. The centurion, an officer in touch with his men, would be able to take the initiative to meet the needs of the moment. In reality, General de Gaulle's vision of the past was in line with that of the present: the French army of the inter-war period was too slow and risked getting bogged down in modern conflicts where speed was of the essence and should become more flexible like the ancient Romans. Mobile, autonomous units would have to be created, capable of striking quickly far behind enemy lines. In the 1930s, armoured cavalry and the air force would embody the same evolution that had taken place in Roman armies. Thus, when he spoke of Hannibal and his soldiers "trained in manoeuvres and divided by their general into autonomous fractions"¹¹ (De Gaulle, 1933, p. 428), he was already singing the praises of movement, autonomy and speed, which he later recommended in *Vers l'armée de métier* (De Gaulle, 1971b). He admired Caesar's army, a professional army that was well trained and able to manoeuvre in elite corps, the result of Marius's reforms; it inspired de Gaulle when he urged the French general staff to "create, as a matter of urgency, a mechanical, armoured army for manoeuvre and shock, made up of elite personnel, which would be added to the large units provided by mobilisation"¹² (De Gaulle, 1933, p. 432).

¹¹ "Rompus à la manœuvre et répartis par leur général en fractions autonomes".

¹² "Créer d'urgence une armée de manœuvre et de choc, mécanique, cuirassée, formée d'un personnel d'élite, qui s'ajouterait aux grandes unités fournies par la mobilisation".

As this example shows, General de Gaulle used ancient history to support his vast military reform project. It also enabled him to discredit his opponents, the advocates of an outdated “immobilism” (Henry, 1989, p. 290). Ancient History also offered de Gaulle the opportunity to “reflect on the events of the past and relate them to the current problems that plague him”¹³ (Henry, 1989, p. 295). Drawing on the works of Xenophon and Julius Caesar, Charles de Gaulle advocated a pragmatic approach to the art of war, to the detriment of the dogmatism that would drive supporters of the *status quo* (Larcan, 2003, p. 631).

Conclusion

Ancient History had a major influence on Charles de Gaulle. His childhood, his education and his personal literary tastes greatly influenced him. The man of 18 June was familiar with the Greco-Roman historians Julius Caesar, Diodorus Siculus, Polybius, Plutarch, Tacitus, Thucydides, Suetonius and Xenophon (Larcan, 2003, p. 601). The subject is so vast that it has not been analysed in its entirety. Choices had to be made in the course of writing this article. Certain aspects were chosen because they seemed to shed new light on Charles de Gaulle and were well documented. There are other aspects of the subject that merit further study. To mention just three: the influence of Roman antiquity on the drafting of the 1958 Constitution, the historical continuity of a kind of French ‘race’ from antiquity to the present day, and the weight of the early Christians in de Gaulle’s thinking. Few know it, but Charles de Gaulle was more fascinated by the Roman Republic than by the imperial regime. He was inspired by the Roman dictatorship model to create, via Article 16 of the 1958 Constitution, the status of temporary full powers for the President of the Republic for a period of six months. To justify the appropriateness of such a provision, he declared on 19 May 1958 that he had re-established the republic and had left when he was no longer wanted; that he was now being recalled to power unwillingly (De Gaulle, 2016, pp. 1104-1109). These statements are very similar to those of Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, the mythical Roman peasant who is said to have introduced the principle of dictatorship in Rome as an exceptional and temporary system of crisis management. General de Gaulle also had in mind the idea of a permanent cultural and ethnic population in France. The classic “our ancestors the Gauls” is a tangible reality for him, not a metaphor: he recognises the ancient Gauls in the French. For example, the divisive spirit of the Gauls described by Julius Caesar was passed on to the Gallo-Romans, the Franks and then the French. This is why de Gaulle liked to quote Julius Caesar’s phrase: “the decisions of the Gauls are sudden and unexpected” (Larcan, 2003, p. 103), believing it to be a truth applicable to the French of his time. He also said that “Vercingetorix was the first resistance fighter of our race” (Agulhon, 1997, p. 6), etc. Christian authors of late antiquity also seem to exert a certain influence on Gaullian thought, in particular the books of Saint Augustine (D’Escricenne, 2022). These are just some of the avenues to be explored, which can only enrich Gallic studies.

¹³ “Une réflexion orientée sur les événements du passé et mise en rapport avec les problèmes actuels qui le tourmentent”.

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