

They're crazy, the Romans. Were they?

The EU does a lot of things better and only a few worse than Rome

BY RAINER BIELING

Roman treaties and the Roman Empire:

A short comparison of the origins of unity.

The adventures of Asterix and Obelix are so popular they've been translated into almost all of Europe's languages. They're two loveable guys, Gauls from a part of the Roman Empire today called France. With magic potion and menhirs the comic book heroes resist the Romans, whom they see as occupiers. That is illuminating. How did Gaul actually come under Roman control?

Yes, how, in fact, did anybody get to enjoy being a citizen of the Roman Empire – and profit from the advantages of a unitary legal, cultural and economic area? Because it stands as the epitome for successful integration and even today schoolchildren all over Europe still hear about the exemplary model provided by the Imperium Romanum.

Rome started from very small beginnings. A farmers' republic on the river Tiber, more a city-state, that didn't extend any further than the fields surrounding it. But they were fertile and their owners were too. Then took place, what has been taking place for millennia, when fertile soil gives rise to more people than it can feed in the long run: they look for more land and if it already belongs to someone else

they have to take it away from them – provided they are strong enough.

The Romans were. They gathered up the surrounding mini-state like Lego bricks, until they came across a really large boulder: the Etruscans, a highly developed culture with a navy that had the say-so in the western Mediterranean. And yet the Romans' farmer-army, managed to bring down the culturally and technologically superior kingdom piece by piece. Even more, the Romans eradicated this high culture so thoroughly that today's scientists are unable to saying anything for certain about the Etruscans' origins and language.

The Etruscans' (in Latin: Tusci) country was today's Tuscany, of which it is said that the purest Italian is spoken there. The Romans also made a tabula rasa with their next opponents, the Phoenicians, whom they called Punici. It is the year 264 BC. The Punic capital was Carthage ("New City"), then a Phoenician colony far from their homeland, Tyros, in today's Lebanon. Since the Persians had invaded and subjected the Phoenician heartland to their rule, the ties to the motherland had been torn asunder. The one-time colony had become a power of its own.

Carthage, in today's Tunisia, possessed half of North Africa, half of Spain, half of Sicily and all of Sardinia and Corsica. Unchallenged, the giant navy ruled the Mediterranean after

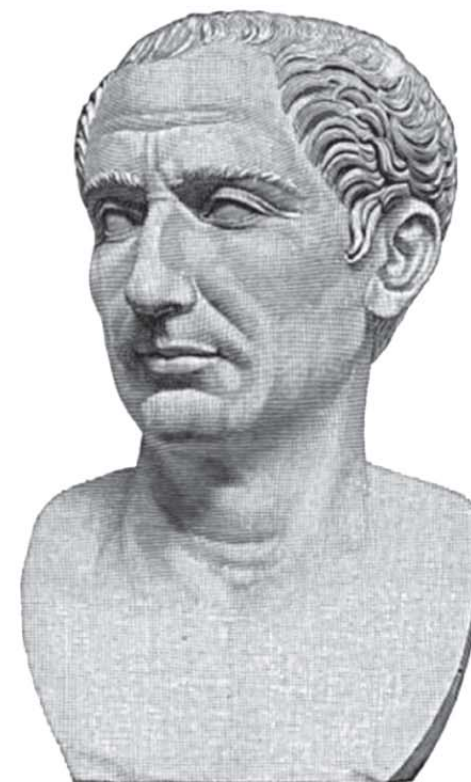
the end of Etruria. And still the young land-based power, Rome, managed to beat the sea-trading power of Carthage in three costly wars. Every schoolchild in Europe knows the famous tale from the middle war, of Hannibal who crossed the Alps with African war elephants to attack the Romans from behind. Oh, if only he'd fought with Carthage's weapons!

Hannibal might have made it ad portas, to the very gates of Rome – a nightmare for the Romans – but in land warfare nobody could get by them. The vengeance was fearful: The third and last campaign in 146 BC was a war of destruction. The Roman commander, Scipio, had Carthage torn down to its foundations and the population, several hundred thousand people, killed – the first properly documented genocide in history. The coasts around the western Mediterranean were now Roman colonies.

But what about the interior? Wasn't the fabled gold of the Celts just waiting there for an eager Roman to grab? In 58 BC there appeared just such a one, and he was ready to doing everything. His name: Julius Caesar. His mission: conquer Gaul, the Celtic country – its goldmines, its gold jewels, its gold coins. Yes, the Celts had their own coinage in their own economic area, which stretched from today's France over the southern half of Germany as far as Austria.

Caesar was already a rich consul at the time, who could afford an army. After his victory over Vercingetorix in 52 BC he became the richest man of his age, now with the means to achieve unfettered power in the state. And so that nobody got the idea he had waged a war to rob and plunder for his own interests, he wrote a book: *De Bello Gallico* – About The Gallic War, with which he glorified his looting of the Celtic treasures and the enslavement of around one million Gauls as a cultural mission in barbarian territory. That's what's taught in schools in Latin lessons, and so Europeans consider Caesar, to this very day, a great man. They even named a summer month after him: July. And they named a second after his successor Augustus, the first Roman emperor: August.

They're crazy, the Romans? Oh no, they knew what they were doing. It's just we've forgotten some of it. That's why it's good, on occasions, to remember how so far apart the Treaties of Rome are from the Roman Empire – and not just in time but also in substance. In historical comparison the EU comes out much better than Rome: It doesn't threaten its neighbors and is a non-compulsory federation among equals, a source of peace in freedom, security and prosperity. In the recognition of its own possibilities is where Rome comes out ahead. ■



*Roman Consul Gaius Julius Caesar
(July 12 or July 13, 100 BC – March 15, 44 BC)*



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*Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus
(September 23, 63 BC – August 19, AD 14)*