

**The following article was published in Saga Newsletter 117, Feb 2009, pp. 5-22. I retain the copyrights to the original text, which is published here with references in parentheses to the page numbers in the Saga Newsletter. I have also included some comments in parentheses that I have received from various persons after the article had been published. E.g. I do agree with Roy Boss that I spent much too much ink on discussing the various types of bows used by the Romans and Saka/Sakai/Sacae. The intention has been to make these hard to obtain articles more widely available to the public.**

**I apologize for any possible mistakes in my English as this is the non-edited version and I am not a native English speaker.**

**Any comments regarding the article are welcome. I will probably return to the topic at some later date and discuss the numbers and other matters at greater length. If you find the article interesting, you will definitely find my Military History of Late Rome due to be published by Pen & Sword interesting as well. I could not resist including some form of advertisement as well ;-)**

**Kangasala on August 2, 2013**

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[p.5]

## The Campaign and Battle of Sambre in 57 BC

By Dr. Ilkka Syvanne

This short article aims to be the first of my many contributions to the study of the Gallic War of Julius Caesar. It seeks to reconstruct Julius Caesar's military campaign against the Belgae (Belgians) briefly and the battle tactics of the decisive Battle of Sabis/Sambre in greater detail<sup>1</sup>. Another of its goals is to give a general assessment of Julius Caesar's generalship during the campaign. This article seeks to prove that the way in which the battle unfolded resulted firstly from the marching formation adopted and secondly from the mistakes made by Caesar just before the battle and thirdly from the mishandling of the situation by Caesar.

Basically, the only real source for the analysis of the campaign and battle is Julius Caesar's propagandistic Gallic War. The following discussion is consequently based upon my analysis of this book and in particular of its *Book 2*. There is no need to introduce this text and its problems to the readers, since these are so well known or at least they should be. Regardless of the fact that my own interpretation of Caesar's battle formation and tactics is quite different from the earlier interpretations I still acknowledge my general debt to earlier studies<sup>2</sup>. [p.6]

### [p.6] 1. *The Spring Offensive and the Stalemate near Aisne 57 BC*

After having defeated the Helvetians and the Germans of Ariovistus the previous year, Caesar learned that the Belgae had formed a coalition of tribes to oppose the probable invasion of the Romans - and not without reason. Their fear by no means unfounded. Caesar indeed had plans to invade the territories of the Belgae and Veneti. I will here analyse only the former campaign.

Caesar left his legions to their winter quarters in Gallia while he himself recruited two new legions. The new legions were immediately sent to Gallia. Caesar ordered his Gallic allies to keep him well informed of the plans of the Belgae. According to Caesar, the Belgae were the most warlike of the Gauls, because they were not in such a close contact with the Romans as the rest. He

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<sup>1</sup> I promised in my previous article dealing with Sun Bin that my next article would reconstruct and analyse nomadic battle tactics. Unfortunately, I have not had enough time to revise my manuscript, since the article in question aims to be much more ambitious in scope than this article which is not to say that this article would not break new ground.

<sup>2</sup> For other interpretations of the Belgian war and the Battle of Sambre, see: Hans Delbrück, *Warfare in Antiquity, History of the Art of War, Volume 1*, tr. W.J. Renfroe Jr., Lincoln and London 1990, 488-494; J.F.C. Fuller, *Julius Caesar: Man, Soldier & Tyrant*, Wordsworth Ware 1998 110-115; Theodore Ayrault Dodge, *Caesar*, Da Capo ed. 1997, 112-127; Yann le Bohec, *César chef de guerre, César stratège et [p.6]tactician*, Éditions du Rocher 2001, 174-195; Adrian Goldsworthy, *Caesar*, London 2006, esp. 233-252; Stephen Marshall, "The Battle of the River Sambre (Sabis) 57 B.C.," in *Slingshot* 14, 9-12.

used this claim probably both to glorify his achievement and as his excuse for the difficulties he suffered in the course of the campaign.

After having completed his preparations and having organized sufficient supplies for the army, Caesar proceeded to attack immediately so as to forestall any Belgae plans of defence. Indeed, the speed of Caesar's campaign came as a nasty surprise to the Belgae. The only Belgic tribe that had not joined the coalition were the Remi and the celerity of Caesar's actions ensured that they would not. The Remi allied themselves with Caesar and provided him with additional valuable information of the plans of the enemy. The Belgae had collected a huge army to oppose Caesar's imperialistic goals. On the basis of this information Caesar was able to formulate his own battle plan. He knew that the size of the opposing army was imposing. Caesar did not consider it wise to engage the whole enemy army simultaneously. Rather he wanted to defeat them piecemeal. Consequently, Caesar's plan had two parts. Firstly, he asked the Aedui to make a diversionary invasion. Secondly, he temporized and waited until the enemy would run out of supplies. The goal was to force the enemy to disperse to their abodes.

The Belgae were also kept informed of Caesar's movements. Consequently, they marched against Bibrax, the capital of the Remi. Caesar reacted by marching to its assistance. He placed his marching camp across the Aisne on a hill overlooking the river and protected his supply lines by placing another smaller fortified camp on the friendly side of the bridge. Bibrax was 8 miles distant from the camp. Despite the presence of the Roman relief army, the Belgae set out to attack the town. Their method of attack was very simple. They cleared the ramparts of defenders with hails of stones and missiles while the attackers advanced in tortoise (*testudo*) formation to undermine the wall. Note the fact that the Belgae also used the *testudo*-formation! The use of the *testudo* was not restricted to the Romans. Caesar responded by sending the Numidian and Cretan archers and Balearic slingers as reinforcements in the middle of the following night. The missiles of the archers and slingers frustrated all hopes of the Belgae ever taking the town with assault alone. [p.7]

This is as good a point as any to dispel the commonly held myth that the Romans did not possess adequate numbers of archers and slingers. It is the famous Battle of Carrhae 53 BC in particular that has caused the mistaken belief that the Romans did not possess adequate numbers of archers and slingers. The Romans did employ specialist mercenary archers and slingers as described here by Caesar, but they did also train a fourth or third of their regulars to use bows (Vegetius 1.15-16). The practise of training the recruits to use the bow and slings appears to have been first instituted by Scipio Aemilianus during the siege of Numantia in 133 BC (Vegetius 1.15) and then institutionalized by his pupil Gaius Marius when he reformed the legions<sup>3</sup>. Still another reason for

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<sup>3</sup> Vegetius claims that a third or fourth of the recruits were trained to use bows on foot and on horseback. This may indeed be the case when the cavalry consisted of regulars (note for example Pompey's Italian cavalry at the battle of

the mistaken belief is the fact that the sources usually portray the legionaries fighting in pitched battles with the *pila* (heavy javelin) and *gladii* (short double edged sword). The reason for this was that it would have been waste of resources to use the legionaries in pitched battles for any other purpose than for their primary role which was to win battles as heavy infantry. The use of bows, slings and stones was usually restricted to the sieges and naval battles. Regardless, the legionaries were still occasionally employed also as pure light infantry for example in such cases where the sources call them with the name *antesignani* (those who fought in front of the standards).<sup>4</sup>

As regards to the Battle of Carrhae in 53 BC, the illusion of the Roman deficiency in the missile arm results from the fact that this battle was the first time the Romans came face to face with the Saka tribesmen of Sakastan/Seistan/Sistan under their chieftain Suren/Surena/Surenas. The Saka were using either the long composite bow and/or the so-called Sasanian composite bow, which both had much longer range and better penetrative power than the short Scythian composite bow employed by the Romans and their allies<sup>5</sup>. The long composite bow and Sasanian bow had been brought to the East of Iran first by the Yuezhi (later Kushans) and Saka from Central Asia at the turn of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. It is probable that the Saka had originally used one or the other version, while the Yuezhi had used the other. Both bow types had also been used by the Xiongnu and their subject tribes well before this. However, as both tribal coalitions acquired new tribes and new influences, both tribal groupings came to use all three types of composite bows. The Romans and the Parthians proper (Parni and Dahae) in their turn eventually also adopted the long composite bow just as did the Alans and other Sarmatian groupings [p.8] in the western steppes.<sup>6</sup> However, in 57 BC, in this war against the Belgae, the Scythian type of short composite bow and the use of mercenary archers and slingers were quite enough to stop the Belgae.

The Belgae responded to Caesar's counter manoeuvres by trying to force Caesar to commit his outnumbered army to a pitched battle. They placed their camp two miles away from the Romans and then began to burn and loot the countryside. Despite the temporary loss of prestige that this entailed, Caesar still wisely chose to avoid engagement. Instead he engaged his enemies in cavalry skirmishes. Then when Caesar saw that the morale among his men was high enough, he sought to

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Pharsalus), but when it consisted of foreign auxiliaries, it seems probable that these used their native tactics. The regularization of the training scheme came only with the advent of empire. It is clear, however, that by Arrian's (Tactica 33ff.) day all cavalry were expected to be able to employ spears, javelins, bows, slings and stones. In other words, when initially only a third or fourth of the cavalry was expected to be able to use both melee and missile weapons, by Hadrian's reign all horsemen were expected to conform to this demand. This means that the expectation that a third or fourth of the cavalry were able to use bows dates from a period earlier than this.

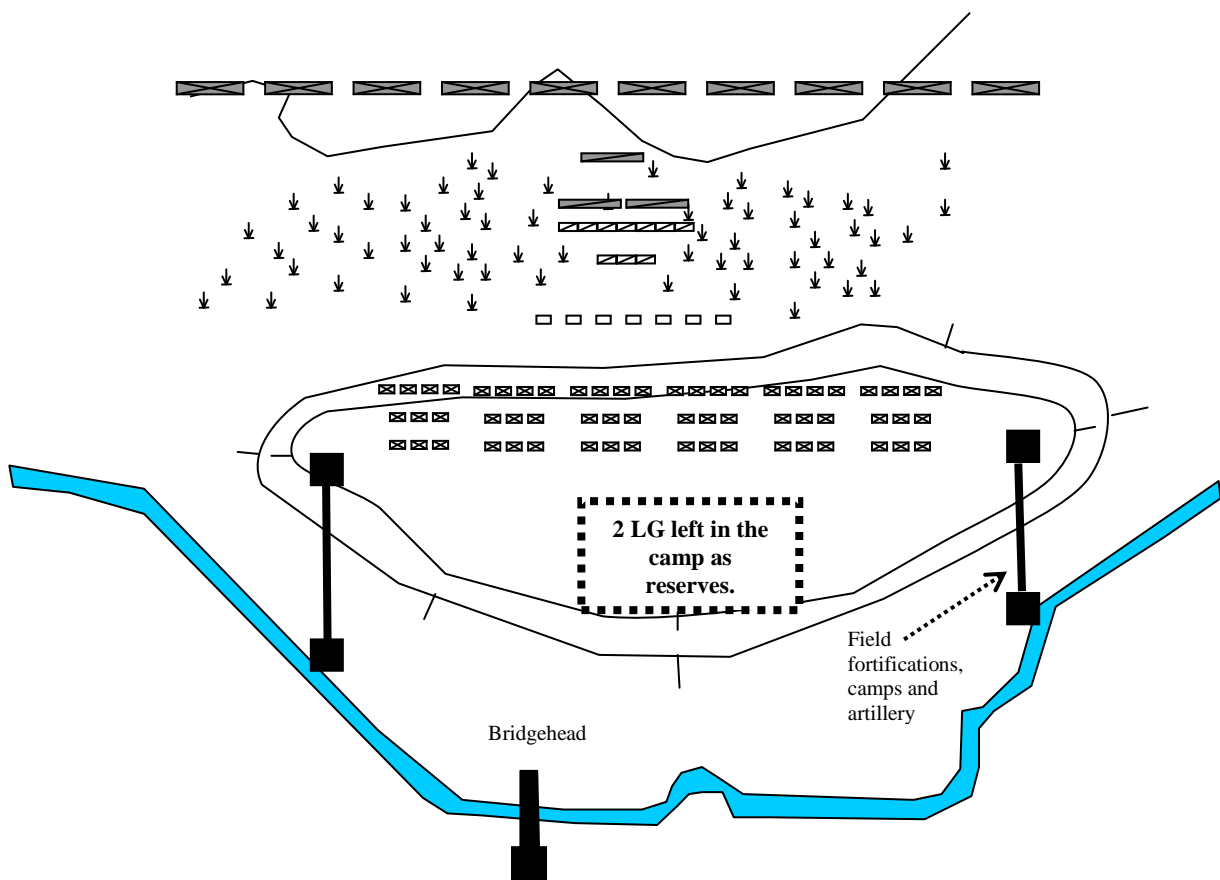
<sup>4</sup> I have also discussed the above in a lecture held at the (Finnish) National Defence University at 16.12.2008. **[My research paper presented in Historicon 2011 and 2012 included even longer analyses of the use of bows by the legionaries and will be later published]**

<sup>5</sup> The conclusion that the Parthians under Suren were in fact Saka tribesmen and that they were employing either the long composite bow or the Sasanian composite bow was independently reached by both the author and Polish art historian Patryk Skupniewicz. Source: personal correspondence in the form of emails. [p.8]

<sup>6</sup> I have also discussed the above in a lecture held at the (Finnish) National Defence University at 16.12.2008.

uplift it further by arraying his army in a very favourable position just in front of his camp. To protect the vulnerable sides of his line he constructed trenches, and at both ends of the trenches he placed forts and artillery. **See Diagram 1**<sup>7</sup>. Just like previously at Bibracte, the two most recently enrolled legions were left in the camp to be used as emergency reserves. The remaining six legions he arrayed in front of the camp. Caesar had chosen his defensive position wisely. The army was well protected by nature and field works, and its supply lines were protected by the forts and river. The enemy occupied the opposing hill. Between the armies lay a valley and a marsh. Consequently, both armies were unwilling to advance, and after inconsequential cavalry skirmishes Caesar led his army back to the camp. **[Diagram 1 is on p. 17 in Saga]**

**Diagram 1**



The Belgae were fast running out of options, because the size of their host was too great for any temporizing. Consequently, the Belgae decided to cut off Caesar's supply lines so that he would be forced to meet them in battle. Consequently, they advanced to the river and attempted to ford it. The movement did not go unnoticed. The Roman scouts reported the attempt immediately to

<sup>7</sup> This array resembles closely the one used by Sulla as Goldsworthy (240) notes. For the battle in question, see Frontinus, *Stratagems* 2.2.17. The overall tactic of placing a fortified bridgehead over the river was to become one of the standard tactical methods of the Romans, for which see Syväne, 2004, 292.

Caesar, who immediately led out all his cavalry, the light armed Numidians, slingers and archers across the river and blocked their attempt.

The Belgae were thoroughly frustrated and their supplies were running low. It was then that the news of the invasion of the Aedui arrived. The morale collapsed and the tribes of the Belgae army simply disbanded to defend their homes. At first, Caesar suspected a stratagem, but when he learnt that the flight was for real he began his pursuit, which was conducted with ruthless efficiency. As a result, Caesar was now in a position to destroy his enemies in detail. Before disbanding, the tribes had agreed to come to each other's assistance, if Caesar attacked, but the speed of Caesar's actions made mockery out of their plans. Soon it was only the most warlike of the Belgae, the Nervii<sup>8</sup> and their closest allies that stood between Caesar and his conquest.

## **2. The Battle of Sabis against the Nervii and their Allies [p.9]**

After having successfully dealt with the other Belgian tribes, Caesar moved against the Nervii and their allies. When his army had penetrated three days' march into the enemy terrain, Caesar learned from some captured prisoners that the Nervii and their allies were blocking his route of advance in a position across the river Sabis at a distance of ten miles away from his current camp.<sup>9</sup> He also learned from the prisoners that the Atrebates and Viromandui had joined forces with the Nervii and that the Aduatuci were on their way to join them. After receiving this information, Caesar sent his scouts (*exploratores*) and centurions to choose a place for the marching camp close to the enemy position. He intended to engage the enemy before the reinforcements would arrive. According to Caesar, the allied army was still a force to be reckoned with because it consisted of about 60,000 men.<sup>10</sup>

Caesar's own army consisted of a large baggage train, eight legions (c. 40,000 men), light infantry and allied cavalry. In other words, if Caesar's figures are correct, the Romans with their allies were only very slightly outnumbered by the Belgae. Caesar's marching column also included numerous allied Gauls and Belgians. The use of these proved to be a double edged sword. They were useful as allies, but afterwards, Caesar learned from prisoners that some of them had fled to the Nervii and told them that the Romans' usual marching order consisted of a column of legions in

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<sup>8</sup> According to Caesar, the Nervii did not even use wine, because they thought that it lowered their fighting ability. This is in great contrast with the later use of wine as a source of courage by the Gauls and Germans before the battle. See Ilkka Syväne (Syvanne), *The Age of Hippotoxotai*, 2004. [p.9]

<sup>9</sup> Traditionally the Sabis has been seen identified as the Sambre, but Yann le Bohec (184-6) argues that Sabis may actually mean Selle. However, as he also notes, for the reconstruction of the events the actual location is meaningless. Perhaps in the future, the archaeology of different sites will provide us with the solution to this problem.

<sup>10</sup> Caesar (2.28) says that out of the 60,000 men able to bear arms only 500 survived the battle. However, earlier he stated that the Nervii had promised the united army of the Belgae 50,000 men, whilst the Atrebates had promised 15,000 men, the Viromandui 10,000 men, and the Aduatuci 19,000 men. Unfortunately, he doesn't say how many of these were present at this battle.

which each legion was separated from the following one by its own baggage train. The Nervii decided to exploit this information by attacking the first legion to arrive at the site of the camp.

According to Caesar, the Nervii had always neglected their cavalry at the expense of their infantry. As a result, they had built wall-like hedges that acted like abates against the cavalries of their neighbours. This proved to be very advantageous also against the Romans. The Romans, who relied upon coordinated management of their units, were now placed in a situation that hindered the visibility between the various sections of the marching and battle formation not to mention their effect on the Roman and allied cavalries.

However, Caesar had one significant advantage over the enemy in this situation. Contrary to the information given to the Nervii by their informants, Caesar's marching order was now entirely different from the one they had seen because now the Romans expected to fight. This worked to Caesar's advantage. Now the marching array consisted of a cavalry vanguard; followed by six legions in light field order (*expediti*)<sup>11</sup>; behind which were placed the baggage of the whole army; and behind them followed the two recently enrolled legions that formed the baggage guard. The subsequent events [p.10] during the battle show that the Treveri horsemen were arrayed between the six legions and the rear guard of two legions to protect their flanks and the interval between the divisions. The subsequent use of the light infantry together with cavalry suggests that Caesar had placed them immediately behind his cavalry vanguard for its support in the difficult and obstructed terrain. The front part of Caesar's marching formation seems to be what the Hellenistic military theoreticians called with the term *epikampios opisthia*<sup>12</sup> (rearward angled half square; three phalanx formation). We can find a confirmation to this theory in Caesar's description of a similar array in Book 8.8. There Caesar describes exactly the same marching order for four legions and calls it an array that is almost a hollow square ("*paene quadrato agmine*"). In other words, Caesar used the defensive *epikampios opisthia* marching formation with cavalry and light infantry vanguard as his front, which was followed by the baggage train and the Treveri and the rear guard. It is particularly notable how closely this array resembles the *epikampios opisthia* formation in the sixth century AD Strategicon. **See Diagram 2.**

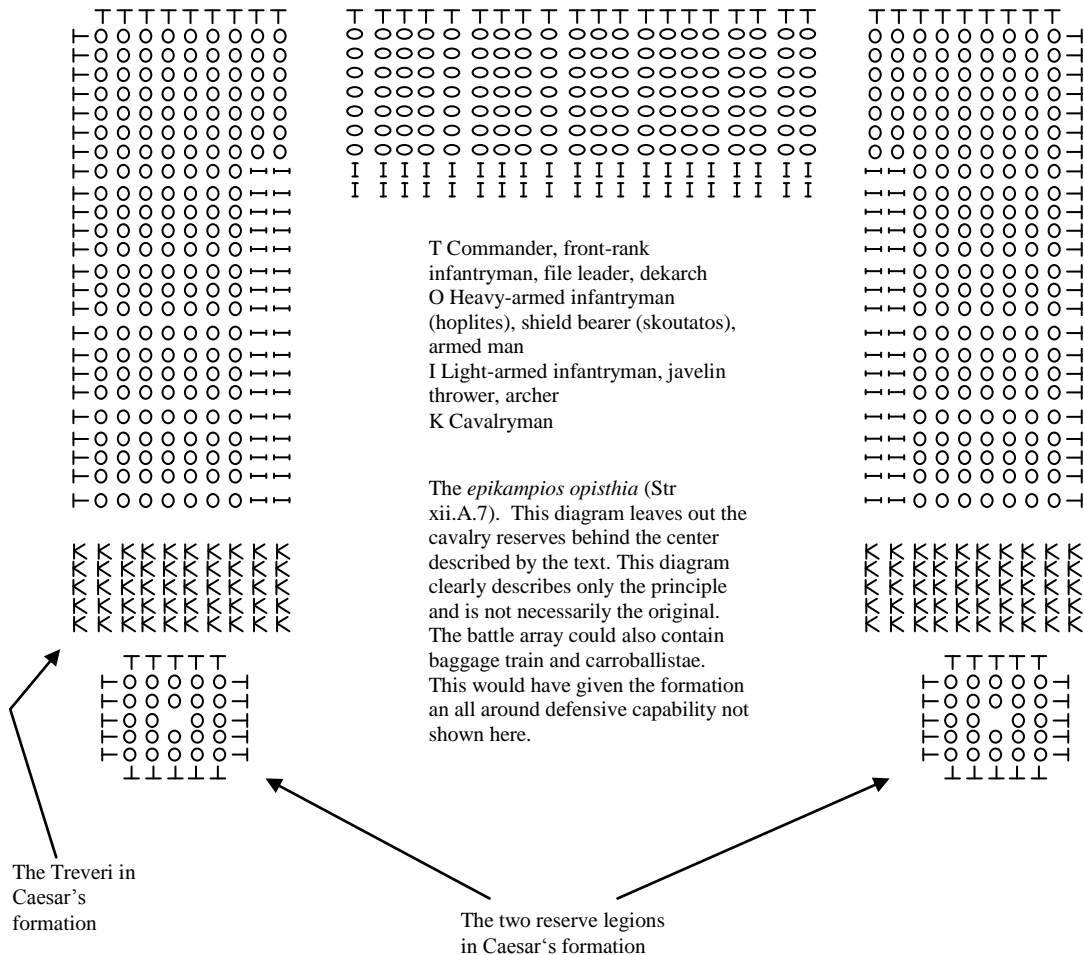
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<sup>11</sup> The *expediti* may mean soldiers in readiness to fight (without extra burdens to carry, i.e. food, drink, utensils etc) or lightly equipped soldiers (only javelins, shields, and swords) without their armour or helmets. [p.10]

<sup>12</sup> See **Diagram 3** together with Syväne, 2004, 219-222. [p.11]

**Diagram 2**

**The epikampios opisthia-formation in the Strategicon.**



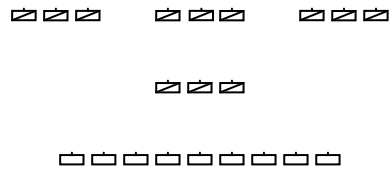
Consequently, it is entirely possible that the two rear guard legions were arrayed as hollow squares as in the sixth century AD formation, but since Caesar's words seem to imply a formation that would have resembled a hollow square more closely and because the rear half would have been needed for the subsequent building of the camp, I have reconstructed the rear guard as the bottom half of the hollow square. **See Diagram 3.**



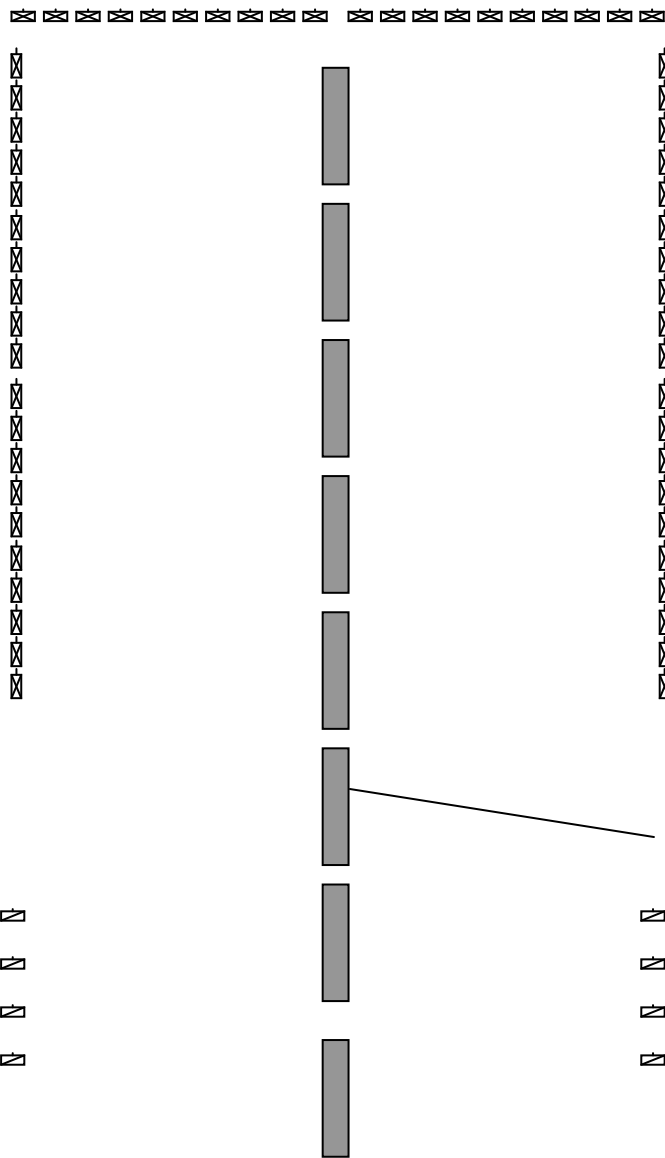
[Diagram 3 is on p.19 in Saga]

### Diagram 3

#### Reconstruction of Caesar's Marching Formation Not in scale!



Cavalry vanguard  
together with light infantry  
support for difficult terrain.  
True distance to the  
*epikampios opisthia* would  
have been greater than  
shown in the diagram.



*Epikampios opisthia*  
with the likely light  
infantry outer section.  
Not in scale.

Baggage train of the legions  
in column formation. Not in  
scale!

The Treveri.

The rear guard and the  
bottom of the hollow square  
consisting of two legions.

The array adopted by Caesar was very useful when approaching the enemy. If his scouts reported that the enemy was approaching in strength, the use of this array enabled Caesar to transform it quickly into the defensive hollow square formation simply by halting the *epikampios opisthia* section while the baggage train was brought inside it after which the rear guard consisting of the two legions closed up the formation, hence the name almost hollow square. In other words, the use of this array enabled Caesar to march his baggage train in a single column formation without sacrificing the overall security of his legionary marching formation. If needed, the marching formation could also be changed into a battle formation simply by wheeling the wings of the *epikampios opisthia* while the reserve would consist of the two legions placed as rear guards. In addition, if the front ranks of the hollow square formation were used as protective bulwark while the rear ranks did the digging it was possible to build the marching camp in complete security. Why Caesar did not subsequently use this latter safety measure when he ordered his men to build the camp begs an answer. One of the contributing factors to Caesar's negligence must have been the previous unwillingness of the combined armies of the Belgae to cross the swamp and attack Caesar at Aisne. He must have expected that the Nervii would behave in like manner.

When Caesar's army reached its intended camping site near the Sabis, only the cavalry detachments of the Nervii were visible across the river. Their infantry was hidden in the woods of the opposing hill. It was now that Caesar made his first and gravest miscalculation of the campaign. As a bulwark for his army, Caesar sent across the Sabis River (only 3ft deep) his cavalry vanguard together with the slingers and archers, which was fine, but then when the first six legions arrived, he gave them the order to begin the [p.11] building of the camp without taking any real precautions. Caesar's only defence to this gross negligence was that as a precaution he also ordered the legionary legates to stay with the legions until the camp would be fortified. The actual fact is that this was quite inadequate as a safety measure, because Caesar simultaneously allowed his legionaries to disperse to their various duties. And this happened just when the enemy attacked. It is no explanation to Caesar's lax attitude that only part of the enemy force was visible, because on the basis of the information obtained from the prisoners he should have known that the enemy army lay hidden in the forest. The only explanation is that Caesar grossly underestimated his enemy. He was caught pants down.

The battle began with repeated cavalry charges by the Roman mounted troops against the Nervii cavalry to which the latter responded by always retreating back to the safety of the woods and their infantry. This continued until the Nervii saw the arrival of the first baggage detachments, after which they charged out of the woods. They immediately routed the Roman cavalry and light infantry and crossed the river and ran uphill against the Romans and their surprised commander. In Caesar's own words:

“Caesar had everything to do at one moment – the *vexillum* to raise, as signal of a general call to arms; the trumpet-call to sound; the troops to recall from entrenching; the men to bring in who had gone somewhat farther a field in search of stuff for the ramp; the line [*acies*] to form; the troops to harangue; the signal to give. A great part of these duties was prevented by the shortness of the time and the advance of the enemy. The stress of the moment was relieved by two things: the knowledge and experience of the troops... and by the fact that Caesar had forbidden the several legionary legates to leave the entrenching and their proper legions until camp was fortified [*Caesar’s excuse*]. These... took on their own account what steps seemed to them proper... Caesar [in the centre?] gave the necessary commands, and then ran down in a chance direction to harangue the troops, and came to the Tenth Legion... then, as the enemy were no farther off than the range of a missile, he gave the signal to engage. He started off at once in the other direction [towards the right wing] to give like harangue, and found them fighting. The time was so short,... that there was no space not only to fit badges in their places, but even to put helmets and draw covers from shields. In whichever direction each man chanced to come in from the entrenching, whatever standard each first caught sight of, by that he stood, to lose no fighting time in seeking out his proper unit. The army was drawn up rather as the character of the ground, the slope of the hill, and the exigency of the moment required than according to regular tactical formation. The legions were separated and each was resisting the enemy in a different quarter; while the view of the front was interrupted... by a barrier of very thick fences. Supports [*subsidia*], therefore, could not be posted with certainty, nor could it be foreseen what would be needed anywhere, nor could all the commands be controlled by one man.” Tr. by H.J. Edwards (Caesar, The Gallic War 2.20-22, Loeb ed., 114-7) with slight changes and additions.

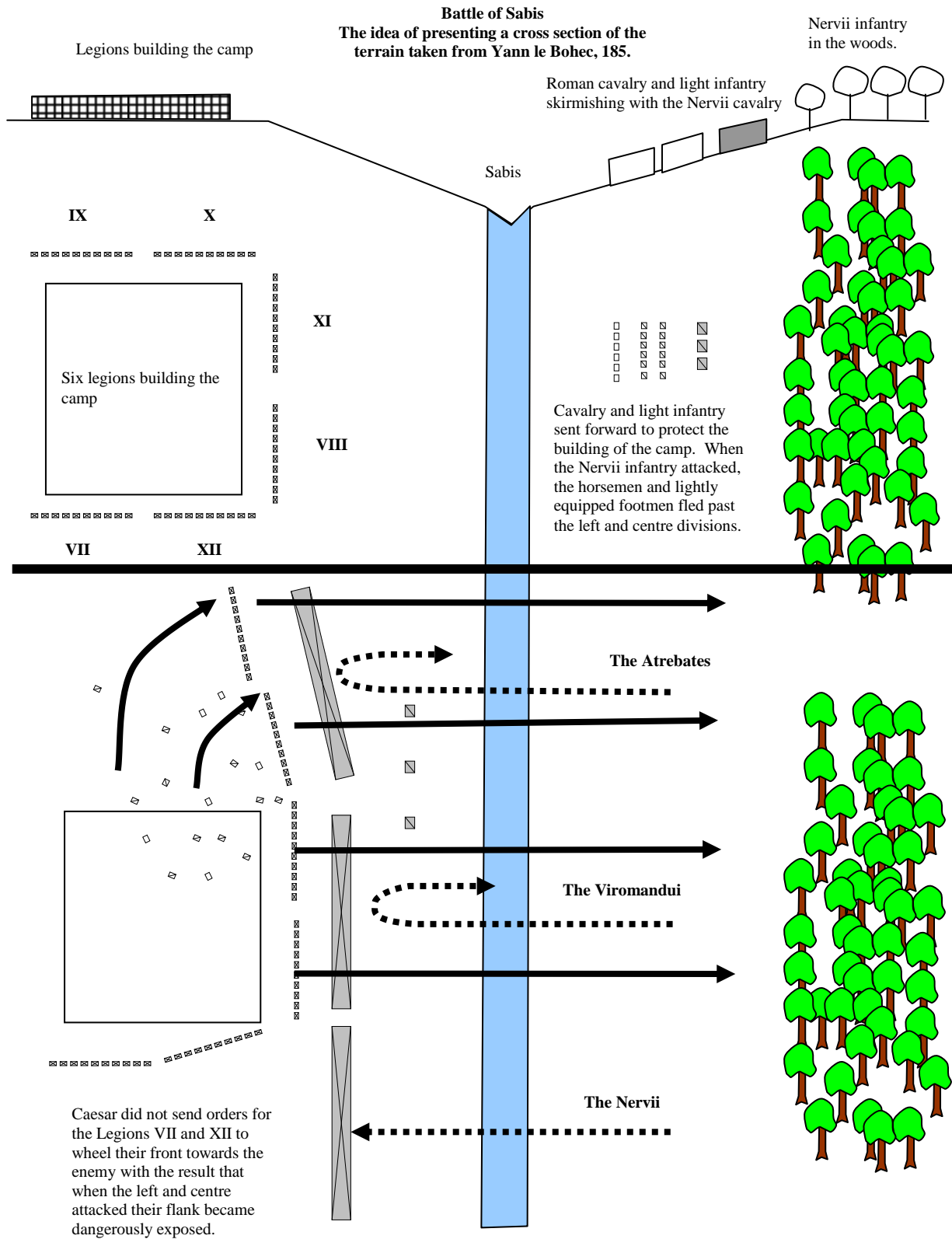
We are fortunate to have this description of the pre-battle duties of the Roman commander. Because of this we have a much clearer picture of what it took for the [p.12] commander to prepare his army for the battle. Caesar clearly implies that in the normal circumstances the arraying and haranguing of the troops took time. However, the high quality of his officer cadre, and the experience and training of his legionaries is also evident. The readiness of the legionary legates and soldiers to act independently deserves the attention of the modern observer. Regardless, the ability for independent action was still limited as the subsequent events make abundantly clear. Of particular note is also the detail given by Caesar that in the usual circumstances before the battle the commander posted supports for the legions. This clearly indicates that the procedure of choosing the type of legionary array (for example the famous *triplex acies*) before the battle required planning and was not an automatic procedure taken by the troops themselves (see later).

“The troops of the Ninth and the Tenth Legion, who had formed up on the left flank, discharged their heavy javelins [*pila*], and, as they possessed the higher ground, speedily drove the Atrebatas... into the river, breathless as they were with running and weakened with wounds; and, pursuing them with the sword as they endeavoured to cross, they slew a great part of them while in difficulties. They did not hesitate to cross the river themselves, and, advancing with the ground against them, when the enemy turned to resist, renewed the fight and put them to rout. Likewise in another quarter two detached legions, the Eleventh and the Eighth, having broken the Viromandui with whom they had engaged, left the higher ground, and continued the fight on the very banks of the river. But thereby – though on the right wing the Twelfth were stationed, and at no great distance from them the Seventh – almost all the front and the left face of the camp were laid bare; and to this point all the Nervii, led by Boduognatus, their commander-in-chief, pressed in dense column, part of which began to envelop the legions on their exposed flank, part to attack the highest ground, where was the camp.” Tr. by H.J. Edwards (Caesar, The Gallic War 2.23, Loeb ed., 118-121) with slight alterations and additions.

**See Diagram 4.** Despite the fact that I have placed the cohorts in the following diagrams in approximately straight lines for clarity’s sake, the viewer should imagine the actual lines to have been more rugged.

[Diagram 4 is on p.19 in Saga]

### Diagram 4



The above quote shows clearly the importance of the higher ground in combat as well as the devastating effect of the thrown *pila* against the physically exhausted Gauls. In their flight, the Gauls were crowded up against the river with the result that the Romans were able to put to the sword quite number of panicked and tightly packed fugitives. When in turn the pursuit of the Romans was slowed down, when they began to cross the river, the Gauls were able to run uphill and regroup to face the pursuers. However, by now the tide of the events favoured the Romans. Each of the divisions in the army (left, centre, right), as well as the single legions themselves, was able to operate as independent entities. What is particularly important to note is that when Caesar had not had the chance of posting supports/reserves in the form of separate lines of cohorts, the successful attack of the centre exposed the flanks of the right wing to the attack of the Nervii. Caesar had personally arranged and given orders for his centre and left divisions, but not to his right wing. Since the hedges prevented visibility and Caesar had not given any orders to the contrary, the right wing was operating under its previous orders to maintain defensive posture on the right flank. As a result, in the absence of any reserves, Caesar's orders for his centre and left wing to attack had dangerously exposed his right wing to outflanking. In other words, when the visibility [p.13] was limited, the ability of the commanders to act independently in the fog of war was quite limited. It is another question why Caesar did not send any new orders to his right division, but rather chose to go there in person which was a waste of valuable time. Perhaps, in the press of the stressing situation, he just forgot to inform the right wing commanders of his sudden change of plans.

Just when the routed Roman cavalry and light infantry were about to enter their camp, the Nervii were already approaching it from another quarter. This again resulted in panic, and the cavalry and light infantry started to flee to another direction. The men of the baggage train were also panic stricken. As a result of the success of the Roman left wing and centre, some of them had advanced to plunder the enemy camp. Now they observed the enemy behind them and naturally they took to flight. These events were also observed by the Treveri horsemen (i.e. they were clearly posted in front of the two rear guard legions and therefore between the legionary components of the array), and they too fled thinking that the Romans had lost the battle. See Caesar, Gallic War 2.23-4.

“After haranguing the Tenth Legion [see above] Caesar started for the right wing. There he beheld his troops hard driven, and the men of the Twelfth Legion, with their standards collected in one place, so closely packed that they hampered each other for fighting. All the centurions of the fourth cohort had been slain, and the standard bearer likewise, and the standard was lost; almost all the centurions of the other cohorts were either wounded or killed. ... The rest of the men were tiring, and some of the rearmost ranks, abandoning the fight, were retiring to avoid the missiles [i.e. the Romans had only a single line of cohorts and the fighting consisted of the exchange of missiles with possible sporadic attacks by sections of the line into hand-to-hand combat]; the enemy were not ceasing to move upwards in front from the lower ground, and were pressing hard on either flank. The condition of affairs, as he saw, was critical indeed, and there was no support that could be sent up [i.e. no reserve cohorts behind because the legion consisted of a single line of cohorts]. Taking therefore a shield from a soldier of the rearmost ranks, as he himself was come thither without a shield, he went forward into the first rank [in this case the *primam aciem* indeed means the front rank], and, calling on the centurions by name, and cheering on the rank and file, he ordered the standards [of the maniples] to advance and extend the frontage so that they might use their swords more easily. His coming brought hope to the

troops and renewed their spirit; ... So the onslaught of the enemy was checked a little [i.e. the Twelfth advanced into melee and forced the enemy backwards]. Perceiving that the Seventh Legion, which had formed up near at hand, was also harassed by the enemy, Caesar instructed the tribunes to close the legions gradually together, and then, wheeling [conversa], to advance against the enemy. This was done; and as one soldier supported one another, and they did not fear that their rear would be surrounded by the enemy [New addition 2013: implies reserves behind], they began to resist more boldly and to fight more bravely [the two legions were now arrayed back to back in two fronted amphistomos/orbis/rotundus formation]. Meanwhile the soldiers of the two legions which had acted as baggage-guard at the rear of the column heard news of the action [i.e. they had already reached the rear of the camp]. Pressing on with all speed, they became visible to the enemy on the crest of the hill; and Titus Labienus [*second-in-command in charge of the left wing*], having [p.14] taken possession of the enemy's camp, and observed from the higher ground what was going forward in our own camp, sent the Tenth Legion to support our own troops [i.e. the rest were used for the mopping up of the rest of the defeated enemy]. ... Their arrival wrought a great change in the situation [i.e. now the Nervii were surrounded]. ... then the sutlers [*in the camp or in the flight*], seeing the panic of the enemy, met their armed assault even without arms [*an exaggeration*]; and finally, the cavalry, to obliterate by valour the disgrace of their flight, fought at every point in the effort to surpass the legionaries. The enemy ... displayed a prodigious courage. When their front ranks had fallen, the next stood on the prostrate forms and fought from them; when these were cast down, and the corpses were piled up in heaps, the survivors, standing as it were upon a mound, hurled missiles [tela] on our troops, or caught and returned our heavy javelins [pila]. ... these were men of a great courage, ....” Tr. by H.J. Edwards (Caesar, The Gallic War 2.25-7, Loeb ed., 120-125) with slight alterations and additions.

**See Diagram 5.** This text shows that when the legions marched in the *epikampios opisthia* formation [and hollow square formation] or were engaged in the building of the camp, the legions were usually arrayed in a single long line of cohorts consisting of maniples (two centuries) arranged side by side. In this instance, the additional haste and the outflanking manoeuvre of the Nervii resulted in the crowding of the standards of maniples too close to each other. The death of the centurions and the presence of hedges undoubtedly also contributed to this state of affairs. Caesar's account suggests that the c. 80 men centuries were arranged as pairs for combat, which were still called as maniples (c. 160 men). This suggests that each pair of centuries was commanded by the senior ranking (*prior*) centurion. **See Diagram 6.** When the centurions were dead, the standards of the centuries obviously became too closely crowded together. As a result, the soldiers of the Twelfth Legion were too close to each other to fight effectively in melee. The crowding together is also the natural human trait in situations of great distress, but its unwanted side-effect is that it effectively prevents the men from defending themselves in the press of numbers. Caesar set about to correct this problem. He loosened the formation by having it advance forward towards the enemy. This was done by advancing the standard-bearers forward while they simultaneously spread out. The panicked men simply followed up the standards. Besides making it possible for the legionaries to fight and defend themselves more effectively, the lengthening/loosening of the line and its simultaneous advance forward had the additional benefit of temporarily halting any enemy attempts to outflank the Roman formation. But this was only a temporary measure. Caesar's next step was the wheeling of the two legions (XII and VII) to form a double front of cohorts, which bought him time. The resulting double front allowed Caesar to maintain defensive stance until help would arrive, which came in the form of the arrival of the two legions. The timely arrival of the reserves and the simultaneous attack of the Tenth legion resulted in the encirclement of the Nervii and their complete destruction. The Nervian division was annihilated almost in its entirety.

[Diagram 5 is on p.21 in Saga]

### Diagram 5

Two recently recruited legions arriving on the scene to build the rear of the camp. Their battlefield role was to form an emergency reserve in front of the camp for the battle line of the six legions. The reserves would have been posted in such a way that each of the divisions (left, centre, right) had its own reserves.

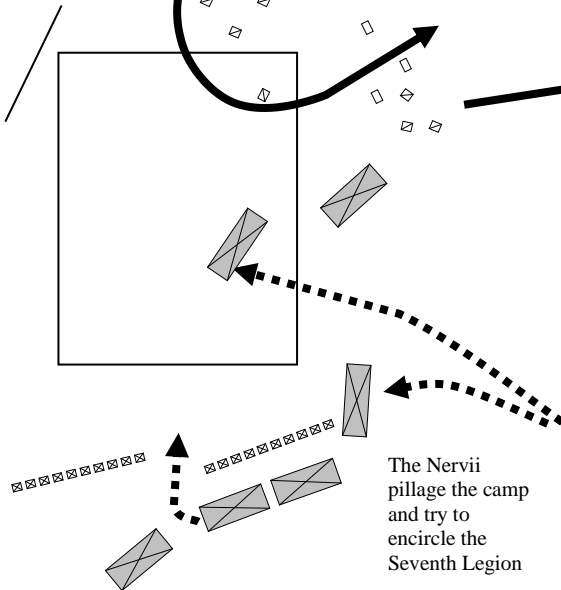
The Roman cavalry and light infantry flee again when they come face to face with the Nervii in the camp.

The men of the baggage train on their way to loot behind notice the enemy behind and begin to flee

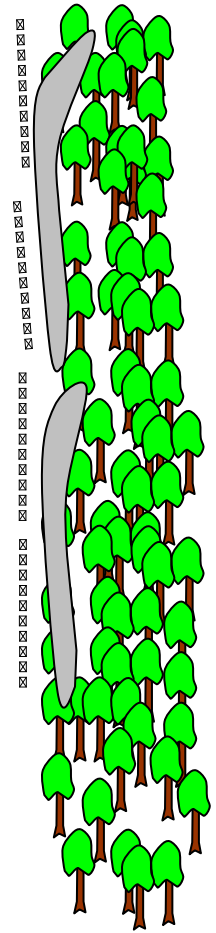
XIII



XIV

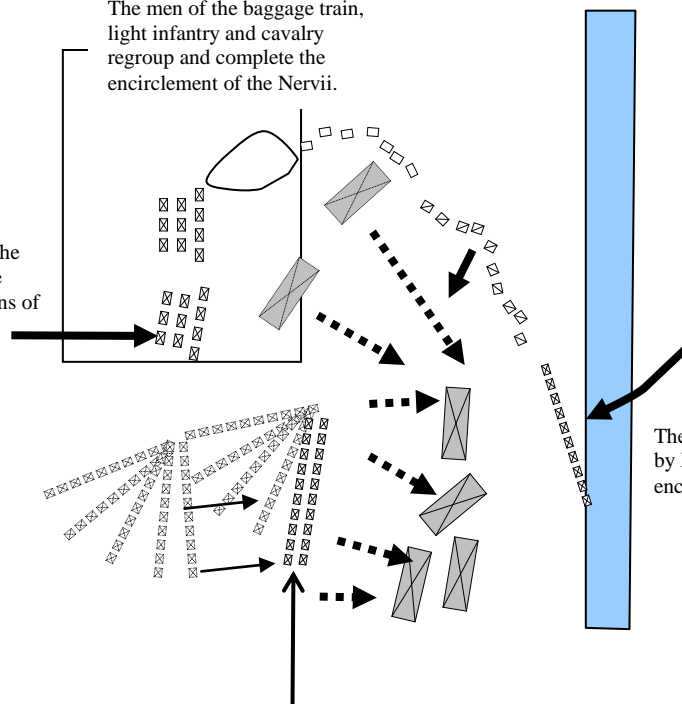


The Nervii pillage the camp and try to encircle the Seventh Legion



The men of the baggage train, light infantry and cavalry regroup and complete the encirclement of the Nervii.

The XIII and XIV Legions arrive at the scene to defeat the outflanking sections of the Nervii and to complete the encirclement.



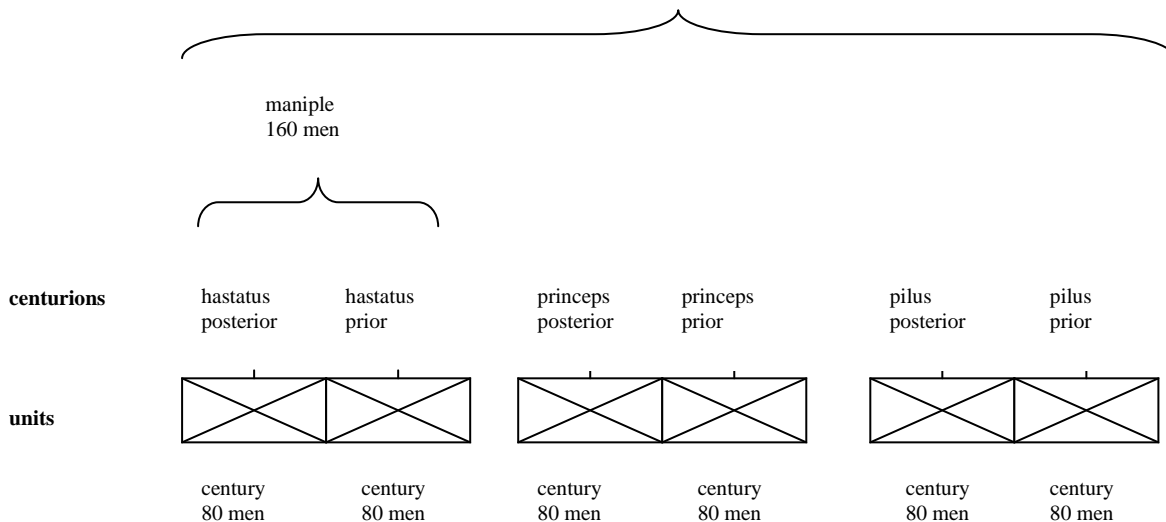
The X Legion sent by Labienus to encircle the Nervii.

Caesar does not tell us how the VII and XII Legions were wheeled and advanced to form the double front. I have here given the version that seems the most likeliest in light of the alternatives. This manoeuvre is at the same time aggressive and defensive. This alternative places the best fighters in the front line without any unit making countermarches.

[Diagram 6 is on p.22 in Saga] **Diagram 6**

**Cohort 480 men**

- commander of the cohort: tribune or other officer appointed by the general (Vegetius 2.12)
- the leading centurion of each pair of centuries was the prior centurion.
- the command structure given here is hypothetical, because Caesar's text does not specify which of the centurions was placed in which position in the line. For example, it is entirely possible that the lesser rank hastati were placed in the centre.



Caesar's account of the battle is a very valuable piece of evidence for the period battle tactics. Despite Caesar's eloquent praise of his legates (which in part results from his [p.15] need to prove that his precautions were adequate), his account still shows that we should not overestimate the ability of the legionary legates to act independently of their overall commander. Caesar's personal presence was clearly needed everywhere along the front. Caesar's account also suggests that, in some cases at least, most of the time in pitched battles was clearly spent in exchanges of missiles. In this case the fact that the Nervii must have been exhausted after their run across the river and then uphill undoubtedly contributed to this state of affairs. Had the Nervii had the energy to engage the XII legion in hand to hand combat immediately, it is highly unlikely that Caesar could have done much to save it. However, the end game of the battle also shows that it was not always necessary to engage the enemy at hand to hand combat at all in order to defeat and kill the enemy unless the enemy themselves charged against the legionaries. Caesar's text proves (see the underlining) that the encircled Nervii were destroyed primarily through the use of missiles and not in melee.

**3. The Mopping Up: the Aduatuci**

When the Aduatuci, who were with all their forces coming to the assistance of the Nervii, heard about the results of this battle, they immediately withdrew. They abandoned all their settlements



and gathered everything and everyone in one hill fortress/town. The stronghold could be attacked from one side only, which was not more than 60m in width. The place was fortified with a double wall of great height. With his characteristic determination, Caesar set about to take the fort. Firstly, he repulsed all of the sallies made by the defenders and had a fortified rampart 4,500m in circumference with forts built around the place. Mantlets were brought forward, a rampart constructed, and a tower with battering ram built. When the defenders saw that the Romans began to move the tower forward, they attempted a ruse. They surrendered, but instead of giving all their arms, they concealed a third. At evening Caesar ordered the gates to be closed and the soldiers to leave the town so that the soldiers would not violate the terms of surrender in the cover of the darkness. In the third watch, the townsfolk sallied out in full force. When this happened, the Romans gave signal by flares and the detachments from the nearest forts hurried to the spot. The advantageous position and the arrival of the reinforcements made the fight a foregone conclusion. The Romans hurled their missiles from the ramparts and towers with great effect. The attackers were thrown back with a loss of 4,000 men. In the morning, the Romans broke open the gates and looted the town. In total 53,000 persons were sold as slaves.

#### **4. Conclusions**

My overall assessment of Caesar's military campaign against the Belgae is that on the strategic and operational levels Caesar campaign was a great success. His use of spies, scouts and reconnoitring parties was very effective. He always possessed first rate intelligence of enemy activities. He always knew where his enemies were, and in what strength and what their plans were. Caesar's use of his allies both as sources of information and as fighting forces was highly skilled. He always possessed secure lines of supply. Caesar's brilliant conduct of the military campaign allowed him first to divide the enemy force and then to defeat the tribes piecemeal. [p.16]

However, as regards to his campaign against the Nervii and their allies, there is no good excuse for his gross negligence of the regular and necessary safety measures when he reached the camping site beside the River Sabis. He made the unfounded assumption that the enemy would act as they had before. In addition, his neglect to send new orders to his right wing almost cost him the battle. He was merely lucky in that his right wing managed to hold its own until help reached it. Consequently, as regards to this campaign, on the tactical level Caesar's actions are not entirely recommendable as examples of good military judgment or conduct.

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