

# A tale of three sites: the monumentalization of Celtic oppida and the politics of collective memory and identity

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## Abstract

Three fortified hilltop settlements (*oppida*) of the 'Celtic' Iron Age have been resurrected in recent history as symbolic focal points in the highly politicized construction of collective memory and identity in modern France. This paper presents a brief comparative consideration of the processes of commemoration by which these three sites were ritually transformed into monuments that have served both to root constructed traditions of national collective imagination in place and to provide a sense of authenticity and continuity for them. In other words, it explores the ways in which attempts have been made to imbue certain places in the landscape with special symbolic value and turn them into historical 'memory factories' for the nation. It also examines the role of archaeology in this process of cultural production.

## Keywords

Memory; Celts; Romans; politics; France.

In *De Bello Gallico*, his account of the Roman conquest of the 'Celtic' peoples of Gául between 58 and 50 BC, Julius Caesar mentioned dozens of fortified hilltop settlements (or *oppida*) by name.<sup>1</sup> Three of these sites have been resurrected in recent history as symbolic focal points in the highly politicized construction of collective memory and identity in modern France (see Dietler 1994). This paper presents a brief comparative consideration of the processes of commemoration (Connerton 1989; Gillis 1994) by which these three sites were ritually transformed into monuments that have served both to root constructed traditions of national collective imagination in place and to provide a sense of authenticity and continuity for them. In other words, it explores the ways in which attempts have been made to imbue certain places in the landscape with special symbolic value and turn them into historical 'memory factories' for the nation. It also examines the role of archaeology in this process of cultural production.

The three sites in question, which have come to form a kind of 'holy trinity' of Gallic identity for France, are Alésia and Bibracte (Mont Beuvray) in Burgundy and Gergovia in the Auvergne. All are celebrated for events that Caesar described as having taken place in 52 BC. Gergovia was the site of an important victory of the Gauls, led by a young noble of the powerful Arvernian tribe named Vercingetorix, over Caesar's forces. Bibracte was the site at which Vercingetorix was later chosen to lead a multi-tribal coalition against the Romans. Alésia was the site of the final great victory of the Romans over the combined army of Gauls after a long siege, and of the ultimate surrender of Vercingetorix. What is important to consider is why these three sites emerged from among many other possibilities to anchor an evolving national mythology of identity and how, in this process, the contrasting symbolic potential of each site has been interpreted and exploited by different political figures at different times.

Each of the sites owes the crystallization of its potential as a privileged place in the French collective imagination to an initial archaeological impetus of the nationalist cultural project of the Emperor Napoleon III during the 1860s. He presided over a major transformation of an already ethnicized sense of French identity rooted in claims to Celtic ancestry in which these sites came to have an important role. The popular vision of France as an eternal Gallic nation had emerged during the revolution of 1789 as part of a racially dichotomized representation of the class structure and the portrayal of the revolution as a war between the purported descendants of the Germanic Franks (the nobility) and the descendants of the Gauls (the bourgeoisie) whom the Franks had conquered in the fifth century AD (Dietler 1994; Pomian 1992; Viallaneix and Ehrard 1982). Despite its philosophical commitment to the idea of a nation defined by abstract principles and voluntary association, the new revolutionary state found itself in the position of having to craft a nation within the artificial borders of a state that encompassed peoples with strong regionally focused identities who did not even share the same language. Consequently, the state became intensely concerned with the production and promulgation of a uniform national culture within its borders, and it set about converting its citizens to this culture with a quasi-religious fervor (Weber 1976). In this context, appeals to a common ethnic heritage provided a more emotionally compelling way of creating a national 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991) that would feel itself authentically rooted in a common past than abstract principles or institutions, and the racialized model of class antagonism furnished the symbolic raw material for this project. This theme of the 'war of the two races', which was a cornerstone of revolutionary Republican ideology, has been a leitmotif in subsequent French history that has had complex, far-reaching, and often paradoxical implications for French colonial policy and its effects on colonized peoples and for current attempts to envision an emerging multi-cultural post-colonial French nation (Amselle 1996).

When the Revolution quickly gave way to Empire, Napoleon I furthered the promulgation of this ethnic nationalism by founding the *Académie Celtique* in 1805, which used the archaeological, folkloric, and linguistic legacy it went about documenting as a means of equating ancient Gaul and modern France, and as a justification for imperial expansion that would reunite the Celtic realm (Johanneau 1807; Mangourit 1807). Between Waterloo and the debut of the Second Empire in 1852, the Frankish versus Celtic definition of the origin of the nation was again contested between the aristocracy of the

Bourbon restoration and romantic Celtophile historians (e.g. François Guizot, Henri Martin, and Amédée Thierry) who ushered in the short-lived Second Republic.

Napoleon III's important contribution to this evolving tradition of Celtic ancestry was to orchestrate the concatenation of an emotionally charged collective historical memory built upon the work of these historians and the commentaries of Julius Caesar, and to fix it permanently in the popular imagination as a foundation of the national mythology of identity encapsulated in the now famous phrase 'our ancestors the Gauls' (Dietler 1994; Viallaneix and Ehrard 1982). Guizot, Martin and Thierry had already provided the previously rather generalized sense of Celticity with a romantic emotional focus by centering it firmly around a heroic historical figure. Their writings gradually elevated the character of Vercingetorix from prior obscurity to assume the position of the preeminent hero and seminal patriot of the French nation (Bianchini 1994; Dietler 1994; Simon 1989, 1996). Through a process of monumentalization, Napoleon III was able firmly to root this human embodiment of French identity, and the historical legacy of Caesar's texts, in the landscape. This was accomplished by using the science of archaeology to authenticate the narrative of historical drama, providing a material link between text, actors, events, objects, and place. It involved equally the use of rituals of commemoration to transform archaeological sites into monuments invoking historical continuity between past and present. Of course, the system of primary education, in which history became a mandatory subject in 1867, was also a major factor in this process (Amalvi 1982), as were a variety of other media of representation and pedagogy.

In this paper, I will examine the initial emergence of the three archaeological monuments mentioned above (Alésia, Bibracte, and Gergovia) in this process, as well as their continuing reutilization in the constantly evolving politics of collective memory and identity.

### **Alésia**

The site now identified as the Alésia of Caesar's commentaries is the plateau of Mont Auxois above the village of Alise-Sainte-Reine in Burgundy. The very act of establishing this identification, of linking a place, an event, and a historical figure from an ancient text to a modern landscape, is the direct result of the intervention of Napoleon III. Before he launched archaeological excavations at the site during the 1860s, this identification had been the subject of much speculation and a bitter regional debate, largely on the basis of textual interpretation. It was particularly disputed between Burgundian scholars who favored Alise and those from the Jura who preferred the site of Alaise, near Besançon, or other sites in the Jura (Büchschütz and Schnapp 1992; Le Gall 1985, 1990; Rabeisen 1994). Although this identification with Alise continues to incite occasional challenges (e.g. Berthier and Wartelle 1990; Potier 1973), it has been largely accepted by the scholarly community and the public since the late nineteenth century. The archaeological project at Alésia began in 1861 when, attracted by the accidental find of a rich hoard of metal objects the year before, Napoleon III sent to the site the members of his recently formed *Commission de la Topographie de la Gaule* (designed to aid his grand project of research on the history of Julius Caesar). They were immediately successful in finding

traces of Caesar's siege fortifications, and Napoleon himself travelled to the site to see the excavations in June of 1861. The project continued on a grand scale with funding from his personal treasury under the supervision of his chief archaeological aide, Colonel Stoffel, until 1865 (Büchsenhützel and Schnapp 1992; Le Gall 1990; Rabeisen 1994).

Napoleon III instigated and lavishly financed (from his personal treasury) archaeological excavations at each of the trio of sites discussed here, but Alésia came to occupy a special place in his project of historical imagination. For it was at Alésia that, with the completion of excavations in 1865, he had erected on the western projection of the plateau a gigantic bronze statue of Vercingetorix, with the face modeled after his own (Plate 1). The statue, 6.6m in height, was commissioned from the sculptor Aimé Millet, and mounted on a monumental 7m tall granite base designed by the famous architect Viollet-le-Duc. Around the base is a bronze band inscribed with the message 'Napoleon III, Emperor of the French people, to the memory of Vercingetorix' and a passage attributed by Caesar to Vercingetorix: 'A united Gaul forming a single nation animated by the same spirit can defy the universe.' The statue was first exhibited in Paris and then transported (standing upright in a wagon) across the countryside as crowds of people flocked to watch it pass, some apparently even genuflecting before it (Le Gall 1990: 74). A museum was also founded by Napoleon III at the site (the first of its kind) to display the relics of the national past unearthed in the excavations, although the majority of them were taken to



*Plate 1* Postcard from 1920s depicting 6.6m tall bronze statue of Vercingetorix by Millet, commissioned by Napoleon III and erected at Alésia in 1865. The face is modelled after that of Napoleon III.

the new Museum of National Antiquities that he established in 1867 in a château at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, on the outskirts of Paris.

The other two sites had to wait much longer for the monumentalizing process, and never attained quite the same degree of recurrent symbolic investment as Alésia. Indeed, Büchschütz and Schnapp have justifiably claimed about Alésia that ‘nowhere else in Europe has an archaeological site been so relentlessly sacralized’ (1992: 273). At first glance it might appear paradoxical that Napoleon should have chosen the location of the final defeat of the Gauls as a focus of his monumentalizing strategy, rather than the site of victory over the Romans or the site of a call for united resistance. It is perhaps true, as Renan noted, that ‘Where national memories are concerned, griefs are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties and require a common effort’ (1990: 11). Massada, Troy, the Alamo, and Culloden all attest to the dramatic potential of sites of tragedy and defeat in stirring emotions and focusing collective memory. But there is more to this choice that emerges from a consideration of the place that Alésia and Vercingetorix occupied in Napoleon’s broader historical vision of the formation of French identity and his conception of the symbolic utility of the site. It is illuminating in this regard to note that Millet offered Napoleon a choice of two models for the statue of Vercingetorix, and that he selected the version of a meditative figure leaning on his sword over a heroically animated figure with his weapon brandished overhead (Ehrard 1982: 307).

In fact, like his imperial predecessor Napoleon I, Napoleon III was enthralled by the symbolic potential of the tension between the heritage of the Gauls and their Roman conquerors. At the moment the statue of Vercingetorix was being erected at Alésia, Napoleon was simultaneously publishing a two volume (plus atlas) study of the life of Caesar that he had been working on for several years (1865, 1866). The Gallic conquest features prominently in this work, and it was largely toward this end that he instigated archaeological projects at the three sites.

This work is quite explicit in its attempt to transform Alésia into a physical symbol of the legitimacy of the civilizing mission of French colonialism that was playing out in different parts of the world and to use Vercingetorix as the fulcrum of this moral lesson. As he wrote:

In honoring the memory of Vercingetorix, we must not lament his defeat. Let us admire the ardent and sincere love of this Gallic chief for the independence of his country, but let us not forget that it is due to the triumph of the Roman armies that we owe our civilization; our institutions, our customs, our language, all of this comes to us from the conquest.

(Napoleon III 1866: 397)

According to his perspective, Roman domination, although accomplished ‘across streams of blood, to be sure, brought these peoples to a better future’ (1866: 397). Hence, for Napoleon III, Alésia was more than the site of an important battle. It was the place where ‘one of those supreme events that decide the destiny of a people’ occurred (1866: 397), where ‘the cause of civilization as a whole was in the balance’ (1866: 396). He, therefore, sought to transform it into both a shrine to the vision of France as the heir to the Roman imperial mission of bringing civilization to the barbarians and a reminder to the subjects of French colonialism of the wisdom of submitting to the beneficial, if temporarily painful,

process they were undergoing. The message was also intended to apply, of course, to the process of internal colonization designed to turn 'peasants into Frenchmen' (Weber 1976), a project that, as noted earlier, had begun with the revolutionary government of 1789 but which saw its most pervasive implementation only after the mid-nineteenth century.

The success of Napoleon III's ideological project is quite evident in the views of Caesar's conquest as a triumph of civilization over barbarism still commonly held by people in France (Goudineau 1990: 17–19). This is not, of course, due entirely to the monumentalization of Alésia. Napoleon's interpretation was very much in keeping with the rampant infatuation with the ancient classical world and its heritage of colonialism that had developed in Europe as part of the humanist tradition that emerged with the Renaissance (Dietler 1995; Marchand 1996; Morris 1994). The symbols of empire associated with modern European colonialism, as well as the institutions and language of domination, resembled those of the ancient Greco-Roman world because the latter served as models for modern practice and as reservoirs of symbolic raw material manipulated in the invention of traditions of cultural ancestry and the construction of the discourse of domination for the colonial powers. Considerable 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1984) of diacritical significance for the ruling class was also entailed in a knowledge of, and cultivated appreciation for, 'the classics'. This classical idolatry was instilled particularly through the universities and institutions of secondary education, such as the British public schools and the tellingly named German *Gymnasium* and French *lycée*, that trained the intellectual and cultural elites of European nations (Dietler 1995). Hence, Alésia was envisioned by Napoleon III as an evocative monument to the historical enactment of this civilizing process in the formation of national identity.

After the humiliating French defeat by the Prussians in 1870, the symbolism of Alésia and Vercingetorix began to assume a new significance. For Caesar and the Romans, the role of bearers of civilization became complicated by a new symbolic linkage with the modern Germans because of their common role as foreign invaders. Hence, in the climate of escalating nationalist fervor that led up to the First World War, Alésia was increasingly interpreted as a memorial to anti-German revenge and resistance. These sentiments, and the frenzied growth of the cult of Vercingetorix the national martyr, were fed by an explosion of artworks, literary pieces, and school texts in which the surrender of Vercingetorix at Alésia became a recurrent dramatically rendered theme (Dietler 1994; Ehrard 1994; Harmand 1985; Pomian 1992; Simon 1989, 1996).

The impassioned writings of archaeologists and historians, such as Camille Jullian (1913, 1977), also made a significant contribution to this new construction of collective memory. Moreover, the journal *Pro Alésia*, founded in 1906 to report on the excavations at the site, became a prominent venue for patriotic purple prose and poetry in which Alésia was referred to as the 'sacred site of Gaul' and a 'place of patriotic pilgrimage' (Pomian 1992: 86, 105). For extra measure, a statue of Joan of Arc, another potent symbol of resistance to foreign invaders, was also erected at Alésia in 1903. The archaeologist Jules Toutain, who carried on excavations at Alésia between 1905 and 1932, managed to combine the civilizing theme with an anti-German twist by claiming that the Roman conquest actually represented a proactive salvation of the Gauls from a much worse fate at the hands of the Germans. Concluding his book with some sober reflections on what would have happened had the Romans lost at Alésia, he wrote:

We have seen what the hegemony of Rome brought. And we know, by multiple examples, the unbearable evils which follow from every Germanic invasion. In place of the Gallo-Roman civilization, abundant and fertile source of a vigorous artistic, intellectual, and moral life, Gaul would have experienced sterile and stagnant barbarism. . . . As paradoxical as our conclusion might seem, it was less Gaul than Germany which was defeated under the walls of Alésia.

(Toutain 1932: 226–7)<sup>2</sup>

Although it no longer excites the passionate nationalist fervor that it did before the First World War, Alésia has been kept very much alive in the popular imagination as the foundation stone of national history. Alésia and Vercingetorix are two names that every French schoolchild knows from an early age, and the legendary status of these names is later fed by comic books (e.g. Asterix), novels, historical works, and other media. A recent example is a popular book on Vercingetorix that is subtitled ‘With him truly began the history of France’, and that concludes with the pronouncement that ‘He was the first resistance fighter of France’ (Bordonove 1978: 214; cf. Lance 1978). Excavations ceased at Alésia in 1865, but were resumed again in 1905 and have remained in more or less continuous operation ever since (see Bianchini 1994; Le Gall 1990). The statue of Vercingetorix sees a steady stream of visitors, who can also visit the archaeological museum, eat at a nearby ‘Grill Gaulois’, and buy souvenir lapel pins and postcards of the statue to take away. This practice began as early as 1906, and by 1914 over 100 postcards with Alésia themes (see Plate 1) were on sale (Pomian 1992: 47, 98). Today the number is still about a respectable dozen. Alésia has also been commemorated in Paris as a Metro station (complete with a giant iron ventilation duct representing a Gaul with winged helmet) and, since 1873, a major street, intersecting rue Vercingétorix and rue Gergovie, lined with cafes and hotels featuring names with Gaulish themes (such as *Le Coq Gaulois*). Moreover, pictures of the statue of Vercingetorix appear regularly in magazines and other venues whenever the issue of national identity is invoked.

The site has also continued to serve as a symbolically charged platform for politicians. Charles De Gaulle, who opened his 1938 book *France and its Army* with an interpretation of the image of Vercingetorix throwing his weapons at the feet of Caesar as ‘an immortal lesson to his race’ (Duval 1977: 16), from 1947 to 1957 reportedly used to make a pilgrimage to Alésia every September 5, the date of the surrender of Vercingetorix (Simon 1996: 12). Likewise, Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of the extreme right-wing National Front party, also chose Alésia to hold a press conference in 1990 in order to issue a typically xenophobic call for ‘resistance to invasions’ and a ‘return to roots’ (Simon 1996: 11).

### **Gergovia**

Two sites have vied for the privilege of being identified as the Gergovia described by Caesar. The one officially designated by Napoleon III and his archaeological project, and subsequently sanctioned by various acts of commemoration, is on a large hill 7km south of the Auvergnian center of Clermont-Ferrand, while the other pretender is on a plateau 2km north of the city (cf. Eychart 1969; Noché 1974). Napoleon III was not the first to

excavate at the former site. There was some amateur exploration in the mid-eighteenth century, and J.-B. Bouillet conducted small excavations in 1817 and 1834 (Ehrard 1982: 307). However, Napoleon III was responsible for instigating and financing the first major archaeological excavations at the site, which were conducted by his chief archaeological aide, Colonel Stoffel, in 1862. These were actually on the plain below the oppidum and were designed to locate the camps and defensive works of the Romans. The results of these excavations were reported in Napoleon's discussion of the site in the second volume of his *Histoire de Jules César* (1866). Shortly thereafter, the village of Merdogne, on the south slope of the plateau, changed its name to Gergovie, and the hill also acquired this toponym. Previously this name was limited to a farm located in the area (Noché 1974: 5).

Napoleon III visited the site in 1862 and left a small stele commemorating the event (Ehrard 1982: 308). However, no doubt for the reasons explained earlier, he did not make a dedication to Vercingetorix or the battle, as he had at Alésia. The idea for the erection of a monument to Vercingetorix at Gergovia, in the form of a pyramid or a column with an inscription, had already been proposed by Bouillet in 1836 after his excavations at the site; but nothing came of it. The idea was raised again several times, including by Henri Martin in 1865 in the preface to his drama *Vercingétorix*. The *Académie des Sciences, Belles Lettres et Arts de Clermont* pressed the Emperor to take up the project, and the state finally purchased a plaster of the heroic statue of a mounted Vercingetorix exhibited by Bartholdi at the Salon of 1870 that was to be erected in an enlarged bronze version on the north-east edge of the plateau (Ehrard 1982: 308). Unfortunately, the defeat of the Franco-Prussian war and the collapse of the Empire intervened. The statue ended up being erected, with great ceremony, in the Place de Jaude in Clermont-Ferrand rather than at Gergovia, but not until 1903. Meanwhile, in 1900, the Académie and allied regional organizations did finally succeed in financing a monument on the plateau of Gergovia. This was an immense 26m tall stone structure consisting of three columns capped by a platform that was surmounted by a winged helmet (Plate 2).

Clearly, issues of Auvergnat regional identity played a large role in the continual agitation to have these monuments to Vercingetorix, the paramount Arvernian ancestor, erected. However, by the time these commemorations were performed at the turn of the century, the symbolic evocations of Vercingetorix had been transformed in the national consciousness, as described above, into a focus of collective memory upon defeat and the quest for revenge in the context of the escalating frenzy of anti-German nationalism that led up to the First World War. Typically, the phrase attributed to Vercingetorix, 'I took up arms for the liberty of all', was inscribed at the base of Bartholdi's monument. Moreover, the commemorative erection of the statues in Clermont-Ferrand and at Gergovia occasioned an increased production of novels, plays, poetry, historical works, artwork, and even an opera taking Vercingetorix as their theme (Duval 1977; Simon 1989). The passionately charged idea of an eternal Celtic nation with Vercingetorix as the first French patriot and resistance leader (Jullian 1913) was firmly set in the popular imagination. Ironically, however, the monument of Gergovia would soon be subjected to an attempt at a rather different reading in the politics of memory during the Second World War.

Archaeological activity had been dormant for many years when excavations were resumed on the plateau of Gergovia in 1933. These continued through the war until 1949,



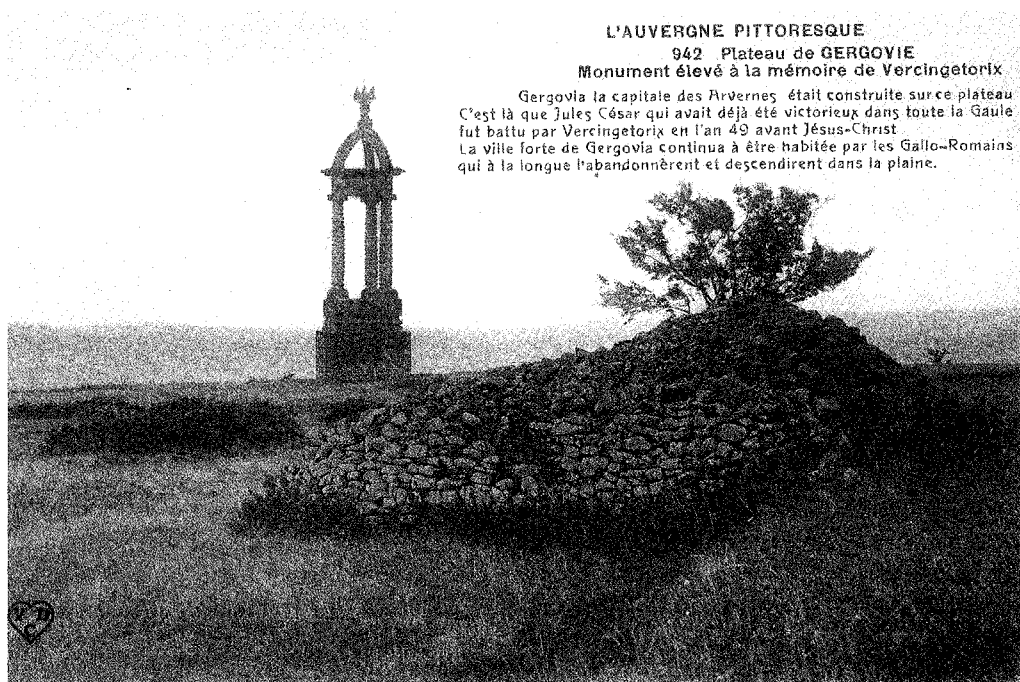


Plate 2 Postcard showing 26m tall monument to Vercingetorix erected at Gergovia in 1900.

with particularly well-financed major programs being carried out during the Occupation in 1941–2 (Grenier et al. 1943). During the war the site was also dramatically incorporated into national politics, as it served as a field of contest between the Resistance and the Vichy government.

In 1940, an archaeological facility on the plateau briefly became a center for resistance activity for which archaeology served as a pretext. This was later commemorated with a stele in 1951 (Ehrard 1982: 313). However, in 1942 the Vichy government orchestrated the most significant commemorative ceremony the site has witnessed, which was highly publicized in the newspapers. On August 30, 1942, 30,000 members of the Légion Française des Combatants were assembled by Marshall Pétain to celebrate the second anniversary of its foundation. The ceremony took place at the monument erected in 1900 (with its base modified for the event by the architect Brière). Handfuls of earth from all parts of France and its empire (including earth from the famous paleolithic cave-art site of Tuc d'Audubert; Demoule 1992) were carried to the site, where they were mixed together and deposited in the base of the monument by Pétain while speeches by various dignitaries explicitly compared Pétain to Vercingetorix. René Giscard d'Estaing, president of the Académie of Clermont, stated,

Twenty centuries later, living incarnation of all our heroisms, the head of sorrowful France in 1942 climbs the same slopes – he also has entwined his destiny with that of the fatherland, and his voice utters a grandiose echo of that of Vercingetorix: 'I give to France the gift of my person.'

(Ehrard 1982: 314)

This ceremony was clearly intended to invoke the image of Vercingetorix in the collective memory and link ancient and current personal embodiments of the nation as a legitimization of the Occupation regime of Vichy. It was also intended to emphasize the need for self-sacrifice in the face of overwhelming adversity for the sake of the unity of the nation. Gergovia, the site of victory over the Roman invader, was perhaps a curious choice of place to deliver this message. However, the logically more appropriate monument of Alésia had already been so imbued with passionate sentiments of anti-German revenge during the Third Republic, that it was perhaps considered a dangerous venue to attempt this kind of novel symbolic manipulation. Gergovia, on the other hand, had already been archaeologically sanctioned as a privileged place of connection to the ancient past and the figure of Vercingetorix without having been previously subjected to this kind of heavily sacralized production of a particular set of politicized memories and historical associations. That this attempt to co-opt Gergovia as a legitimizing memorial linking Vercingetorix and Pétain was ultimately unsuccessful in overcoming the resistance counter-reading of its symbolism is suggested by the fact that the Vichy government later began to melt down bronze statues of Vercingetorix (Pingeot 1982).

Since the war, Gergovia has seen occasional gestures of reutilization in political strategies, but it has not acquired the sacred status of Alésia, perhaps because of the lingering memory of the taint of Vichy. In 1989, for example, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and Jacques Chirac chose Gergovia to kick off their campaign for European elections. Their speeches at the site emphasized 'the continuance of French identity' and the fact that Gergovia was where Vercingetorix had accomplished 'the first victory of France' (Carton 1989: 10). But they were also humorously playing on the association between their political opponent Laurent Fabius and the Roman general Lucius Fabius who was defeated by Vercingetorix at the site.

### **Bibracte (Mont Beuvray)**

Napoleon III was also responsible for the first excavations at Bibracte, which resolved a previous controversy and fixed its historical identity as the site identified by Caesar as the place where Vercingetorix convened 'the council of all Gauls' in order to rally united opposition against the Romans. However, despite his interest in including information about it in his volumes on the life of Caesar, for the reasons explained above, the site was not as important to the nationalist mythology of historical identity he fostered as was Alésia. Hence, he did not erect statues or otherwise try to monumentalize the site. Nor did he visit it. After a brief sondage in 1865, archaeological excavations at Bibracte were first mounted by Jacques-Gabriel Bulliot in 1867 with funding from the personal treasury of Napoleon III (until the demise of the Empire). These excavations continued until 1895, after which they were taken over by the celebrated archaeologist Joseph Déchelette until 1907 (Bertin and Guillaumet 1987; Goudineau and Peyre 1993; Guillaumet 1996). Archaeological activity at the site then experienced a long hiatus, and it passed to the back burner of public consciousness.

Over a century after the debut of Napoleon III's first excavations, the French President, François Mitterrand, resurrected Bibracte as a major symbolic focus of his personal vision

of national identity. In a process remarkably similar to that established by Napoleon III at Alésia, but choosing a site with a quite different symbolic potential, archaeological excavations were reopened at Bibracte in 1984 with financing on an unprecedented scale. In 1985, Mitterrand journeyed to Mont Beuvray and officially monumentalized it as a 'national site'. This event and the call for Gallic unity under Vercingetorix were both commemorated by monuments (Plates 3a, b). Ten years later, in April of 1995, he inaugurated an enormous, lavishly financed new museum and research center at the site that were designed by the architect P.-L. Faloci after a major international competition (Colardelle et al. 1995). In 1996, the site was also physically and symbolically linked to Alésia by a 118km footpath established by the region of Burgundy (Simon 1996:14). As Mitterrand stated 'it is my wish that soon Bibracte will attract the French people from all corners of the country and that all will find each other at the same time they find their roots' (Mitterrand 1985: 55). The intent was clearly to turn Bibracte into a 'memory factory' for the collective imagination of the modern French nation on the model of Alésia, but with a different vision of French identity situated according to its position in a quite different world from that of the Second Empire and Third Republic.

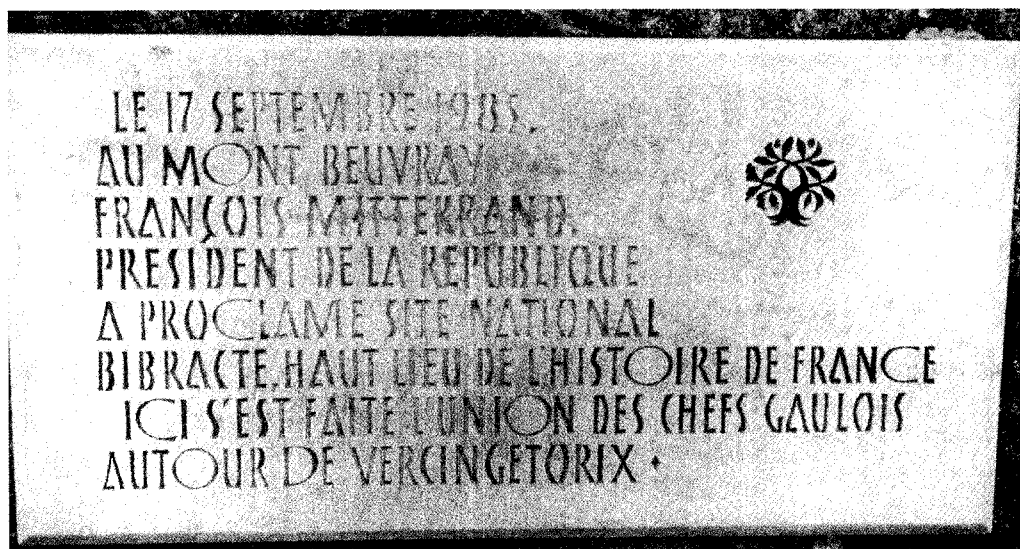
His speech at the initial ritual of dedication stressed that Bibracte was, for the French, the place where 'the first act of our history took place' (Mitterrand 1985: 54). But it also emphasized the place of Bibracte, and of France, within the newly emerging supra-national European community, a community that was linked to an ancient pan-European Celtic world (see Dietler 1994). He subtly noted that Bibracte was 'one of the grand sites of Celtic civilization', a civilization which was 'not defined by political boundaries but by common culture', and which 'extended over the better part of Europe' (Mitterrand 1985: 54). He also appealed to archaeologists and visitors from other European nations to come to the site and share in its heritage. In fact, the research center was designated a 'European Archaeological Center', and excavations at the site are conducted by scholars from 'all the territory of ancient Celtic Europe' (Colardelle et al. 1995: 21). Today that includes archaeologists from at least ten countries, running from Hungary to Scotland. With its lavish new museum, the site is obviously also expected to draw large crowds of tourists who will be instructed about the place of Bibracte within the history of the larger Celtic world.

Bibracte is one of two archaeological sites around which Mitterrand constructed personal political rituals through a process of symbolic *bricolage* (Crumley 1991). However, despite his highly mediagenic annual rite of pilgrimage to the Paleolithic site of La Solutré (Abélès 1988, Crumley 1991), Mitterrand's sense of personal identity and his connection to the national collective imagination he strove to construct eventually became so entangled with the mythology of Bibracte that, in an interview in 1995, he claimed to identify personally with Vercingetorix above all other figures of French history, and he expressed the desire to be buried at Bibracte. This wish was later abandoned in the face of the controversy it generated (Simon 1996: 7-10).

Today, in addition to the attentions of politicians, archaeologists, and tourists, Bibracte also witnesses the annual performance of the regional invented tradition of 'Celtic fire festivals' complete with druids (Marquardt and Crumley 1987). Although it is the only one of the three sites that does not have a street named after it in Paris, through the efforts of Mitterrand and heavy doses of media publicity, Bibracte has finally joined the others in finding a prominent place in the national imagination.



*Plates 3a and b* Stone monuments erected at Bibracte commemorating Vercingetorix and the 'council of all Gauls', and Mitterrand's official dedication of the site as a 'national monument'.



**Conclusion: the politics of collective memory and identity**

Since the pathbreaking essays of Halbwachs (1950, 1992), it has been evident that the collective memories of groups, societies, or nations are not preserved essences, but rather are ‘reconstructed on the basis of the present’. Collective memory involves the use of certain instruments ‘to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society’ (Halbwachs 1992: 40). Moreover, the production of collective memory is a crucial element in the construction of identity and the reproduction of the large-scale ‘imagined communities’ that constitute modern nation states (Anderson 1991; Connerton 1989). Although the recent history of the three sites outlined above must be understood within the specific context of French history, it also suggests something more general about the reuse of monuments in political strategies geared toward the production of collective memory and identity and the role of archaeology in this process.

In each case, a ritual of commemoration was employed symbolically to transform a point in the landscape into a monument that served to connect the current popular imagination to a particular moment of ancient history deemed to be seminal for the nation. The historical memory being resurrected in each instance was furnished by a basic text of Julius Caesar that had been embellished and reinterpreted according to the nationalist mythology of the period by various historians. This mythology provided a very effective emotional focus for the collective imagination by centering the historical narrative around a heroic individual figure who was projected as an embodiment of the national character: Vercingetorix. It is this feature, the association of Vercingetorix with these three sites, I believe, that explains their emergence from among many other possibilities as the selected anchors for the project of collective memory. Archaeology then provided the authoritative voice that authenticated the continuity between ancient event and modern place and provided the material relics that served to trigger imaginative recollection. The text of Caesar thus became transformed from historical document into emotionally charged collective memory by being rooted in the modern landscape and associated with a sacralized sense of place and person.

Each site was officially commemorated through the erection of a monument, but at different points in time. Each commemoration reflects a different interpretation of the historical significance of the struggle between Vercingetorix and Caesar; and each interpretation reflects a projection of recent historical circumstances onto the collective memory of the past. The choice of site for each act of commemoration was determined by its perceived potential symbolic resonance with the current situation and, of course, the history of competing mythologies constructed around the other sites. The role of politics in this process is abundantly evident. As Nora (1992) has noted, this kind of monumentalizing creation of memory sites tends to occur especially during periods of perceived breaks with the past. Each of the sites considered here clearly owes its prominence on the national stage to the attempted symbolic manipulations of national leaders seeking to mobilize the collective historical imagination towards their own visions of national identity and of the situation of France in the larger world during moments of national transition or trauma. It is also striking how many of these leaders attempted to identify themselves personally with the figure of Vercingetorix, to fashion a personal connection

to the event commemorated at the site and its legacy. Napoleon III, who had the statue of Vercingetorix modelled in his own image, used Alésia as a symbol of legitimacy for the French continuation of the civilizing mission of Roman colonialism. Pétain, who had himself rhetorically portrayed as Vercingetorix, attempted to use Gergovia to legitimize the Vichy government and call for national self sacrifice. Mitterrand, who felt a personal identification with Vercingetorix and wanted to be buried at Bibracte, used the site to promote national unity and a repositioning of France within the emerging European Union.

It is important to remember, however, that what is being analyzed here are attempts at cultural production from the top down. As Pétain's efforts at Gergovia testify, this does not always result in reception or consumption of the message in the intended fashion at the popular level. Political ritual is not always effective in naturalizing hegemonic discourse of the state (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Kelly and Kaplan 1990; Kertzer 1988), and collective memory is not inscribed from above on a blank slate. The symbolic resonance of some sites or objects resists manipulation in counter directions. Moreover, monuments are always subject to subversive interpretations and contestation of meaning within the factionalized process of competition by which nationalist mythologies of identity are constantly reconstructed. As the changing interpretations of Alésia indicate, sites introduced into the popular imagination with a particular set of symbolic evocations may remain emotionally charged foci of memory while undergoing dramatic transformations of significance.

The role of archaeology in this process is integral and complex. Sites which are deemed to be significant parts of the 'national heritage' need archaeology to authenticate connections to past events, to anchor identities and narratives of memory in place (see Crumley 1991; Dietler 1994). Archaeology also furnishes evocative material relics of the past that can be displayed in museums and portrayed on monuments and other representational media. As the former French president Giscard d'Estaing noted quite explicitly, 'today the French people increasingly want to renew their individual or collective memory. And archaeology, with its material and concrete evidence, constitutes an "objective memory" of the life of a people or a civilization' (Giscard d'Estaing 1981: 7). To the extent that archaeology is useful to the state in creating 'memory factories' that sustain national mythologies, it receives funding on a commensurate scale. The lavish financing of selected excavations by Napoleon III and Mitterrand are obvious examples of this practice. Archaeological research is an expensive endeavor, and archaeologists must seek sources of funding where they are available. However, attractive as it may be, there are dangers in accepting this kind of support. Leaving aside the more obviously destructive cases of collaboration in the notorious 'Faustian bargain' of Nazi archaeology (Arnold and Hassmann 1995), even participation in projects related to more seemingly benign national mythologies may tend subtly to influence archaeological practice. There may, for example, be subtle pressures to focus research on one brief moment in a site's complex history that will allow it to be linked to a particular event, or on certain kinds of structures and objects that are deemed especially significant in a historical narrative, at the expense of other historically or anthropologically important periods or issues.

However, my intention in this paper was not to engage the growing body of discussions of the complex historical relationship between archaeology and nationalism or the

thorny issue of the responsibilities of archaeologists in the representation of the past (e.g. Dietler 1994; Gathercole and Lowenthal 1990; Kohl and Fawcett 1995). More modestly, I wished to suggest why archaeological sites are often selected for reuse as icons of identity and to analyze the ways in which they become ritually transformed into monuments that serve to anchor collective memory in the landscape. This is clearly a highly politicized process of cultural production in which archaeological sites constitute an important symbolic resource that is mobilized through ritual processes of commemoration. Their relative value resides precisely in their potential to provide an authenticating material link between a mythologized narrative of the past and a set of current circumstances, to materialize prototypical events and persons in the creation of communal memory.

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### **Notes**

- 1 For those who are not familiar with the terms, it should be pointed out that, for present purposes, 'Gaul' and 'Celt' may be accepted as more or less synonymous. Leaving aside the subtle distinctions and historical variations in ancient usage (as well as numerous modern reinterpretations of the terms), suffice it to say that the Romans preferred to use 'Gauls' and the Greeks preferred to use 'Celts' to describe, rather generally, the same 'barbarian' peoples of western Europe. The terms do not have significance as indigenous ethnonyms in the ancient context (see Chapman 1992; Collis 1996; Dietler 1994).
- 2 This represents an ironic reversal of interpretations offered by apologists of the nobility before the 1789 Revolution, some of whom suggested that the Franks had 'liberated' the Gauls from Roman oppression and even suggested a Gallic enthusiasm for this exchange of rulers (e.g. Dubos 1734).

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