

# THE LEADING FACTS OF FRENCH HISTORY

## SECTION I

The Gauls . . . their virtues and their vices are preserved in the hearts of the French people. — MICHELET.

### GAUL BEFORE THE ROMAN CONQUEST

**1. The Country and its People.** — What we know to-day as France once formed the greater part of a much larger territory which the Romans called Gaul.<sup>1</sup>

The boundaries of Gaul were the Atlantic on the west, the Alps and the Rhine on the east and north, the Pyrenees and Mediterranean on the south. Looking at the map,<sup>2</sup> we see that the country was an irregular square, and that it possessed the best situation in Europe. It was wholly within the temperate zone. It was favored with an abundance of fertile soil, a climate admirably suited to agriculture, and equally advantageous to health. It was well protected against invasion by

<sup>1</sup> The Romans called the country Gaul, a name which they derived from its inhabitants, the Gauls, — a word of unknown meaning, though supposed by some authorities to signify "barbarians."

The Gauls were mainly a Celtic race, and are believed to have had their origin in Asia. At an early period they overran central and western Europe and the British Islands. Gaul included the countries now known as France and Belgium, together with parts of Holland, Switzerland, and western Germany — or the region between the Pyrenees and the Rhine (Map No. II, page 2). The total area was about 245,000 square miles. Modern France embraces a little more than 204,000 square miles, or about four fifths the area of the state of Texas.

<sup>2</sup> See Map No. II, page 2. To see the square form to the best advantage, hold the map so as to look across it in a slanting direction from southeast to northwest.

barriers of seas and mountains. Finally, the Atlantic on two sides, and the Mediterranean on the other, gave it the means of commercial intercourse with the most important countries of the globe; in a word, Gaul was evidently fitted by nature to become the home of a great and prosperous people.

2. **Monuments and Remains of the First Inhabitants.** — The people that first inhabited the country were savages. They had neither written laws nor history. We find, however, a partial record of their life in the remains of their cave habitations, their burial mounds, their rough-stone monuments, and their lake dwellings. At Carnac, a little village of Brittany, in the extreme west of France, the traveler crossing the moors sees at a distance what seems to be an army of giants advancing toward him.

As he draws nearer, the army proves to be a multitude of upright bowlders of rough granite covered with long white hairy lichens, — the growth of ages. These stones, the largest of which are upwards of twenty feet high, are arranged in regular order like troops following their leader. They extend in long lines from the southeast to the northwest, and they give all who see them the impression which would be made by a military force halting on its march.

Some have supposed that they are part of the remains of a vast heathen temple like that of Stonehenge, England. Others think they were set up to mark some decisive field of battle or important gathering of warriors. But these theories are at best pure conjecture. One thing only is certain: that these mysterious monuments were raised by human hands, and represent human purpose. The peasants call them "memory stones," because to them they recall the buried race that labored to erect them, ages, perhaps, before the Pharaohs laid the foundations of the Pyramids.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Hunnewell's *Historical Monuments of France* for a good picture of the stones at Carnac.



In the same district there are extensive burial mounds. In these, tools and weapons of stone and of metal have been found. They were in all probability deposited with the bodies of their owners to aid them in their silent journey to that world whose existence the barbarian never doubts, and for which in his own simple way he invariably prepares.

Again, in those parts of the country where caves occur, an examination of the earth in them reveals quantities of ashes, split bones, and fragments of various rude utensils. They show that these caves were once dwelling places, and that they were occupied by successive generations of men.

Finally, in the beds of many lakes — for instance, that of Geneva — the ruins of ancient villages have been discovered. These villages were log huts, built on rough platforms, extending over the water. They were probably constructed there as a means of security against the attacks of savage beasts or of still more savage men. They offered the further advantage of a constant supply of fresh water and fresh fish, so that their garrisons were in no danger of dying from either thirst or starvation in case they were besieged by the enemy.

From these and similar remains we can form a tolerably clear idea of the condition of the early races of Gaul, even at a period so remote that northern Europe was a vast field of glacial ice and southern Europe simply a wilderness of unbroken forest.

**3. The Cave or Rough-Stone Men and their Successors; the Celts.** — The first inhabitants were probably the cave men. They built no houses and formed no communities, but lived apart like wild beasts, in the gloom and damp of their subterranean homes. In some cases they may have constructed rude shelters of piled stones, or dug holes in the sides of hills for the same purpose. They had no tools but their fingers; they had no weapons but clubs or sharp-edged stones.

They lived on roots and berries, and on such fish or game as they could manage to catch or kill. In time, however, they learned to make hatchets and spearheads of flint, and they invented the bow and arrow. With these tools and weapons they could fell trees and hunt the mammoth and the reindeer, of which they have left drawings scratched on the tusks and bones.

Following the cave or rough-stone men, there came a people who were able not only to shape, but to polish, their flint implements and weapons. They built huts in the forest or on the borders of the lakes. They learned, too, how to make rude pottery and to weave coarse cloth. Furthermore, they kept cattle, horses, sheep, and hogs; they raised some grain; they tamed the wolf or wild dog, and trained him to defend their dwellings and to help them hunt game.<sup>1</sup>

Still later came the Celts, bringing with them tools and weapons of bronze.<sup>2</sup> They kept all the useful animals, and lived largely by the cultivation of the soil. It was apparently a later and more warlike branch of the Celts to whom the Romans gave the name of Gauls. They were a stalwart race, with long light hair, dyed flaming red, and fierce blue eyes. They overran the country between the Pyrenees and the Rhine, which henceforth got the Latin name of Gaul.

The Gauls were for a long period the terror of all nations. They scorned the use of armor, and stripped themselves for battle as the Greeks did for athletic sport. When the call to arms was heard, they rushed to the field with a shout of joy; the man who came last was tortured to death as a wholesome

<sup>1</sup> The dog seems to have sprung from some animal of the wolf species. The Eskimo dog can, in fact, hardly be distinguished from the gray wolf. Cuvier says that the domestic dog is "the completest, the most singular, and the most useful conquest made by man."

<sup>2</sup> Bronze: this is a mixture of copper and tin. It can be made nearly as hard as steel, and takes a sharp and quite a durable edge. Chisels made of it can be used in dressing stone.

warning to the rest. After a battle the victors cut off the heads of their enemies and carried them home. Out of these they made a selection. The skulls of common men they nailed over their doors as ornaments, or made them into drinking cups; but those of noted warriors were carefully embalmed and kept in cedar chests, as precious relics to be brought out on great occasions.

This strange people was full of resources. They were imaginative, inventive, and impulsive; they had, too, that peculiar power which refuses to stay beaten, but after every defeat speedily recovers itself and is ready for a fresh effort. Yet notwithstanding this elasticity of temperament, the Celtic peoples were never able to permanently withstand the advance of those German races which followed and drove them before them. Later, we shall see that Gaul was to be no exception to this rule.

**4. The Gauls take Rome; the Romans enter Gaul.** — In the sixth century B.C. the Celts or Gauls, who had perhaps already invaded Britain, crossed the Alps and took possession of northern Italy.<sup>1</sup> For two hundred years they threatened to march south and make themselves masters of Rome, but they were repulsed again and again. Each time, however, they renewed their attacks, raiding the provinces and carrying off captives. At length, 390 B.C., they stormed and took the Latin capital. The inhabitants, with the exception of a few illustrious men, sought refuge in the citadel; but these last, scorning to fly, seated themselves in the great public square of the Forum, and there awaited their fate.

The spectacle of these venerable fathers of the city, sitting there silent and motionless as statues, struck even the barbarians with awe: to them they seemed not men, but gods. At

<sup>1</sup> Later, the Romans called that part of Italy where the Gallic invaders had settled Cisalpine or Hither Gaul, to distinguish it from Gaul proper (*i. e.*, France, etc.), which they designated by the name of Transalpine or Further Gaul.

length a warrior, more daring than the rest, stepped forward and ventured to stroke the long white beard of one of the senators. He resented the familiarity with a blow. That rash act broke the spell. The enraged Gauls fell upon their valiant but helpless foes, and soon left their bleeding corpses lying in the dust of the Forum, amid the smoking ruins of the city.

The Romans, however, bought off their victors, and eventually succeeded in beating back and conquering the Italian Gauls.

A solemn curse was then pronounced on any one who should cross the Alps, which were declared to be the natural barriers of Rome. The Romans themselves were the first to cross, in an expedition to aid their allies, the Greeks, who had planted a flourishing city in Gaul, which they called Massalia, and the Romans Massilia, but which is now known as Marseilles. This city, which was the great rival of Carthage, begged the help of Rome against the barbarians. The Romans sent an army, and not only drove off the enemy, but established a settlement of their own on the shores of the Mediterranean. This was the first time a Latin legion had permanently set foot in Gaul. They called their new colony the Province, a name which has since become changed to Provence.<sup>1</sup>

**5. The Germans overrun Gaul.**—As the Gauls became more civilized, they lost much of their old warlike spirit. Then a fiercer people swept down from the north. The German tribes on the shores of the Baltic and the North seas were bent on conquest. They, with other barbarians, burst into Gaul at different points, burning, pillaging, massacring. Early in the second century B.C. they resolved to drive out the Celts of Gaul, and then to attack Rome. Marius,<sup>2</sup> the Roman general, fully alive to the danger which threatened the city,

<sup>1</sup> Provence (prō-vōns').

<sup>2</sup> Ma'rius.

determined to meet the Germans in Gaul. He encountered them near Aix (102 B.C.),<sup>1</sup> in the vicinity of Massalia. The conflict raged for two days; it terminated in the crushing defeat of the invaders.

It is said that more than a hundred thousand dead were left on the battlefield, which got the name of the "Putrid Plains" from its heaps of unburied and decaying corpses. Years afterward, those who tilled the soil in that vicinity used to plow up broken weapons and rusty shields, and the peasants propped up the grapevines of their vineyards with human bones. Had the conflict resulted in the victory of the northern barbarians, the progress that Gaul had made might have been destroyed, and the whole future of the country changed.

**6. Summary.**—Looking back, we see that the Celts or Gauls laid the foundation of modern France. Their vivacity, love of glory, and contempt of danger, their elastic and impulsive temperament, and their intellectual quickness are still characteristic of the brilliant and powerful people that have in great measure sprung from them.

Different elements, it is true, were destined to come in later, and to have a most important influence; but still the races that first peopled Gaul did, perhaps, more than any other toward shaping the future of the nation. Originally these Celtic tribes had, as we have seen, no history; but none the less, barbarians though they were, they prepared the way for all the history that was to follow.

<sup>1</sup> Aix (aks).