

The Role of Symbols in the Formation of Nationalism in France: On Caesar and Vercingetorix

Mina Adachi Tokai University

1. Introduction — Raising the Question

In the nineteenth century, the idea of the modern nation-state was growing in Europe. Generally speaking, a nation-state promotes the formation of a “nation” as one community, embracing all the people in the domain of the state within this logic. Based on this principle, people share language, culture, and value consciousness. In this way, the modern nation-state enhances its own nationalism, and in this process, the mechanisms of national unification are introduced, one of which is the symbol.

France is one such example, a nation that experienced political disturbance between the French Revolution and the formation of the Third République. The Second French Empire is considered a transitional period, which prepared for the modern nation-state. In France, the national symbol changed, from a representation of authority to one of democracy, between the Second French Empire and the Third République. Specifically, it was the transition from images of the Roman Empire and Emperor Caesar to the Gallic hero Vercingetorix that indicated the political shift and transformation of the state structure in that period. This paper discusses the transition of the national symbols, as well as the relation between the ruler and the nation in the period of formation of the nation-state.

2. A Note on Symbols

Ernst Cassirer says in his *An Essay on Man* (1944):

“... definition of man as an *animal symbolicum* ... That symbolic thought and symbolic behavior are among the most characteristic features of human life, and that the whole progress of human culture is based on these conditions, is undeniable.”¹⁾

Therefore, humans are beings who think and behave in response to symbols.

A “symbol” is a kind of sign that, in itself, operates as a recognizable object. A “sign” is a representation of something that exists, and this representation produces a meaning. Ferdinand de Saussure analyzed the structure of a sign in relation to language theory. The most important notion of his theory is the dual elements of “signifiant” (a sound pattern or a representation) and “signifié” (a meaning or a concept) in language. Here, these dual elements are considered reverse sides of each other, and this idea forms the basis of his semiotic theory. Thus, a sign consists of “signifiant” as a representation and “signifié” as a meaning, and both of these have an impact on receivers. Although Saussure discussed sign theory in the form of a dyadic relation, Charles Sanders Peirce introduced a triadic relation, which consisted of “sign,” “object,” and “interpretant.” According to Peirce, a “sign” is a representation of something, and an “object” is that “something.” In addition, the “interpretant” is the meaning or notion created in a receiver’s mind through a sign. In other words, it can be said that a sign is positioned as a medium that connects “objects” and “interpretation.” Therefore, based on Peirce’s theory, a sign (the representation of something) is understood by receivers as a concept (a meaning), and the meaning of a sign can be formed by the receivers’ interpretation.

We can look at the role of a “symbol” in the same way. A symbol is one type of visual sign, and can have a big impact on people. This is because when a certain thing is recognized as a symbol, the matter that is related to it is

also recalled, almost unconsciously. In Peirce's sense, a symbol is both the representation and the object. What is most important should therefore be the "interpretant." It is this element that gives significance to the symbol, because a symbol shapes an image in the receivers' mind, and that image influences and even dominates them. This is the function of a symbol as "interpretant."

National symbols are often closely related to nationalism or patriotism. For example, the representative national symbol of France, Jeanne d'Arc, symbolizes the patriotic spirit. She is positioned as a popular heroine who saved France during the Hundred Years' War and contributed to the growth of popular nationalism and patriotism in the 19th century.

In this paper, we focus on France moving from a period of absolute monarchy to the formation of the modern nation-state by way of the Revolution, and examine two representative symbols found in the historical process. One is the Roman Empire and the emperor Caesar, and the other is the Gallic hero Vercingetorix. The former was used in the period of absolute monarchy after Louis XIV, as well as during the Napoléonic Empire after the Revolution. However, it is the latter that was used as a patriotic symbol at the time of transition from the second imperial period of Napoléon III to the Third République. These were made national symbols by the statesmen and systems of the time, and can be considered to have directed the flow of each age.

What is the role or function of a national symbol? Things that are vivid reminders of the existence and dignity of statesmen are often positioned as national symbols. Under the nationalism oriented around the power of a reigning ruler, a symbol controlled by that ruler becomes a national symbol, standing for the ruler's will of authority and domination, and simultaneously forcing people's agreement whether they like it or not. Therefore, a national symbol forms an image in people's minds, which is what Peirce calls "interpretant" in his theory.

3. The symbolization of the Caesar and the Roman Empire

(1) Absolute Monarchy—Louis XIV and the Roman Empire

A remarkable example of the establishment of national symbols can be seen in the "Sun King," Louis XIV. He used the ancient Roman Empire and Roman emperors as national symbols. He wanted his identity and the ancestors of his homeland to be identified with ancient Rome, and liked to equate himself with several rulers, particularly Augustus or Constantinus Augustus.

The linking of such dignity and authority to Louis XIV was mostly led by his entourage, especially Cardinal Mazarin, Nicolas Fouquet, and Cardinal Colbert. Cardinal Mazarin applied his political interest to the impact of arts on public opinion. With the help of Nicolas Fouquet's literary skills, Cardinal Colbert tried to highlight the king's achievements through literature and poesy, investing the king with the historical image of ancient Rome. Above all, in the Academy of Art that was organized at the time, records of the "King's history" and "King's heroic behavior" were compiled, connecting the king to Roman Emperor Augustus.

The identification of Louis XIV with the Roman emperor increasingly formed an image of "Louis=Auguste." The Louis=Auguste schema, in which the Roman emperor and the French king were seen as one and the same, was formulated as the embodiment of the emperor's public image. In addition, the symbolization of Louis XIV as the "Roman Emperor" can be seen in the statue of the emperor in the style of a Roman equestrian statue, and the image of the king of France being the legitimate heir of the Roman Empire was established through a careful strategy. Louis XIV incorporated the spectacle of the Roman emperor into his own image, implying that it was unquestionably he who was the symbol of public power of the state.

"Louis XIV sois compris comme Louis-Auguste implique qu'une partie de ses sujets se saisissent eux-mêmes à travers ce mythe, qu'ils analysent leur vie et la politique comme française-romaine, comme une nouvelle manifestation de l'essence impériale autonomisée. Cela implique qu'on crée des signes de cette Rome

ressuscitée, à travers les arts, la littérature ou la musique. D'où les allures romaines qu'affectionnent les contemporaines de Louis XIV, les héros romains auxquels ils s'identifient au théâtre ; d'où la romanité des fêtes de cour dans lesquelles ils se retrouvent pour s'inventer comme Anciens.”²⁾

Finally, the Roman Empire was included as a national symbol based on the idea that the right to the throne of France was conferred by the Pope, as successor to the Roman Empire. However, at the same time, there is no denying that Louis XIV was proud that he had risen above the Roman Empire. Thus, the symbolization of the Roman Empire was a strategy of Louis XIV to demonstrate his transcendence.

(2) The First Empire—Napoléon I and Emperor Caesar

The example of French leaders viewing themselves as the heirs and embodiment of the ancient Roman civilization was passed down by Napoléon I, even after the French Revolution. This idealization of Rome was supported through the titles of positions in the national government, the accession as emperor, and through objects such as the Arc de Triomphe and bronze statues. Considering that the First République built after the French Revolution was built through fear politics, Napoléon I, who was sensitive to the trends of the populace, sensed that the people wanted a centralized and absolute ruler. In the same way as Louis XIV, Napoléon I superimposed the spectacle of a Roman emperor onto himself and constructed the image of himself as “Emperor” Napoléon who would lead France to glory.

However, in terms of political transition, Napoléon I was completely different from Louis XIV. Neither the Roman Empire nor any Roman emperor had played a role to support Napoléon I. After the French Revolution, Napoléon I was perhaps aware that he had gained the position of emperor through his own achievements. Because of the collapse of the old monarchic systems, based on the divine right of kings or hereditary systems, Napoléon I could ascend all the way to the king's seat. Thus, it was neither by being the successor of a Roman emperor, nor through the hands of the Pope that Napoléon I became emperor.

For Napoléon I, the Roman emperor was nothing but a splendid emblem of power. Napoléon I, by likening himself to the Roman emperor, made people aware that he reigned over them with the absolute power. It was due to this that the “Emperor Napoléon” appeared as a national symbol for the people who experienced the French Revolution. After that, Napoléon I was able to develop his “Bonapartism” unopposed.

4. The Shift in Symbol From the Roman Emperor to Vercingetorix

(1) Napoléon III and the Roman Emperor

As mentioned above, the national symbol in France had been the Roman emperor through the period of the monarchy to the reign of Napoléon I after the French Revolution, despite the difference of its implications in each period. However, during the period of the second French emperor, the national symbol began to change, perhaps as a result of the formation of the modern nation-state. King indicates as follows:

“Napoléon (III) seems to have faced a dilemma... Napoléon was perhaps appealing to national unity by promoting Vercingetorix in the form of a gigantic statue but giving prominence to Caesar on the more intellectual basis of his writings.”³⁾

Here, it can be said that Vercingetorix came to be hailed as the national symbol in place of the Roman emperor, who had been the symbol until then. Nevertheless, it seems that Napoléon III still maintained the Roman emperor as an ideal image, stating as follows:

“... , mais n'oublions pas que c'est au triomphe des armées romaines qu'est due notre civilisation; institutions, moeurs, langage, tout nous vient de la conquête.”⁴⁾

In fact, Napoléon III was interested in the Roman emperor and his history, because he considered himself to be the successor of Bonapartism. Napoléon III (who was called Louis Napoléon at that time) was the president, elected by the provisional government established after the February Revolution. This was a popular election, but the right to vote was limited to men over the age of 21. Despite this, the number of voters increased from 250,000 in 1846 to 9,000,000 in 1848. In total, 97% of new voters participated in this election, which Napoléon III won with 74% of the votes. His victory was supported by regional peasants. Among the peasants, several kinds of parties were included, i.e. right party, left party, etc. This indicates that his support base was not solid, but such uncertainty was advantageous for him. After the June Days uprising, people, who preferred to a conservative direction, voted more neutral candidate. Because he did not proclaim clearly any principles and attitudes in politics.

Under the intermingled situation, it seemed that Napoleon III concealed his idea toward Bonapartism. At the end his first term as president, Napoléon III dissolved the assembly by coup d'état, and assumed the imperial title, Napoléon III. Thus, his coronation displayed his inheritance of Bonapartism from Napoléon I. As a result, the reign of Napoléon III displayed several opposing factors, such as democracy and authoritarianism, sovereignty of the people and absolute power, and patriotism and egalitarianism.

As explained above, it was natural that Napoléon III should adopt the title of “Roman Emperor” as a national symbol. Formally, he needed the glory of the Roman Empire as his support. However, despite his respect for the Roman emperor, his attitude was a little different from the rulers before him in that he seemed to idolize Napoléon I as a kind of Roman Emperor. For example, he created a national holiday on August 15 (le quinze août), which was Napoléon I's birthday. Moreover, it was only the national holiday celebrated across various regions of France. Thus, for Napoléon III, the nuance of Caesar as a national symbol was different from Louis XIV and Napoléon I. The most important agendas for Napoléon III were to end the February Revolution and assimilate his reign. He aimed to position himself as the successor of Bonapartism, through the symbolization of Napoléon I.

Because of its formation process, the Second Empire of Napoléon III was increasingly criticized by various groups. For example, Victor Hugo published “Napoléon-le-Petit” and “Châtiment” as criticism, although he had declared his support for Napoléon III when the latter was president. In addition, faced with difficult aspects of politics and diplomacy, Napoléon III's Empire came to a turning point in the 1860's, which resulted in the transition to the so-called “Parliamentary Emperor” (Liberal Emperor). For example, he abolished several kinds of bans, and liberalized trade. In this way, his system of rule was transformed to one more supported by the people.

(2) The Shift of the National Symbol During Napoléon III's Reign

The shift in Napoléon III's recognition of the state is reflected in his use of national symbols. From 1865–1866, he was engaged in writing “Histoire de Jules César,” because he thought of Caesar as signifying the intellectual base of France. However, while Napoléon III had effectively inherited the policy of idealizing ancient Rome, he also focused on Vercingetorix of Gaul, who was vanquished by Caesar. He excavated the ruin of Alésia, the region of the battle between Rome and Gaul, uncovering the exact site of the war. Therefore, it is supposed that Vercingetorix, a hero of Gaul, emerged for Napoléon III as another national symbol.

Why did Napoléon III excavate the remains of the battlefield of Gaul, which had never been given consideration in French history? A possible reason was given by Anthony King, who quoted the writing of Napoléon III:

“United Gaul, in a single nation, fired by a single spirit, can defy the world, Napoléon III, Emperor of the French, in memory of Vercingetorix.”⁵⁾

Here we can get a glimpse of Napoléon III's political intention in unifying the state and winning people's favor. In addition, his attitude included tactics to strengthen the national identity against a crisis of foreign policy. In other words, it is plausible that he focused on Vercingetorix as a means to create French racial unity. However, he was surely not anxious for the unity of the nation to intervene in his reign.

This highlights Napoléon III's situation. He laid out two opposing national ideologies as national symbols during the Second Empire: an ideology of ancient Rome bestowing benefits to France, and an ideology of Gaul (Gallia[L]) as the motherland. However, it is also true that he saw Napoléon I as the symbolization of Caesar. Therein lies the political structure of Bonapartism, in which everything is centered on Napoléon I, and this was reflected in the formation of the national symbol. People were participating more actively in the social system after the Revolution. Thus, while the Second Empire of France was a period of despotic rule, it was also a political system in which it was not possible to disregard people's intentions, and Napoléon III therefore had to strategically and deliberately represent two symbols that were opposed to each other.

This can be thought of as a change in the objective meaning of the symbol. If one keeps in mind the true intentions of Napoléon III, it seems that the significance of the national symbol wavered between highlighting his own power and his allegiance to the nation of France. Thus, it represents a turning point in the meaning of national symbols in the formation of French nationalism. There was a change from individual worship toward the king and the emperor, to a national ideological apparatus that aimed for national integration. Although such a transformation would be seen in the democratic system of the ensuing Third République, it is ironic that it was Napoléon III who paved the way for this transformation.

5. The Symbolization of Vercingetorix in the Third République

During the Third Republic, Vercingetorix came to be hailed as the national symbol in place of the Roman emperor. Vercingetorix became a more affinitive symbol to the nation than during Napoléon III's reign, which resulted in the realization of the spirit of République, as well as of Vercingetorix as a national symbol.

Vercingetorix is the "hero" of France (Gaul / Gallia [L]) who fought against the Roman army in Alésia. However, this causes a paradox, as Caesar would go on to be considered "the aggressor and oppressor" of France, although he had previously been symbolized as the origin of France. During that time, the schema of the two symbols, Caesar as "the aggressor and oppressor" of France and Vercingetorix as the representative patriot, were gradually formulated. As a result, a decisive symbol shift can be found.

In 1877, a textbook for elementary school children titled "Le tour de la France par deux enfants" (The tour of France by two children) was published by G. Bruno. Since the publication of its first edition, six million copies were printed by 1901. The textbook consisted of a dialog between two boys, Jean-Joseph and Julien, with some comments by the narrator of the book. The text described Vercingetorix's battle of Alésia and Caesar's treatment of Vercingetorix (execution) as follows:

- Hélas! Dit Jean-Joseph avec amertume, il était bien cruel, ce César.
- Ce n'est pas tout, Jean-Joseph, écoutez:
Enfants, réfléchissez en votre cœur, et demandez-vous lequel de ces deux hommes, dans cette lutte, fut le plus grand.
Laquelle voudriez-vous avoir en vous, de l'âme héroïque du jeune Gaulois, défenseur de vos ancêtres, ou de l'âme ambitieuse et insensible du conquérant romain?
- Oh! S'écria Julien tout ému de sa lecture, je n'hésiterais pas, moi, et j'aimerais encore mieux souffrir tout ce qu'a souffert Vercingetorix que d'être cruel comme César.
- Et moi aussi, dit Jean-Joseph. Ah! Je suis content d'être né en Auvergne comme Vercingetorix.⁶⁾

In the citation, the two boys describe Caesar as a cruel conqueror, and praise Vercingetorix as the guardian hero of their motherland. In addition, the narrator's comment leads them and young readers through the transition of the national hero from the Roman emperor to the Gallic Hero.

In this way, even elementary school children were taught the schema that Vercingetorix was the noble hero of the motherland. A remarkable version of Vercingetorix as the hero is the sculpture by Emile Chatrousse (*Aux Martyrs de l'Indépendance Nationale*, 1870). This sculpture depicts Saint Jeanne d' Arc and Vercingetorix lined up holding hands, the former having saved the country during the Hundred Years' War, and the latter the hero of Gaul who confronted the conqueror Caesar. Vercingetorix is regarded as a hero of France, perhaps even more so than Jeanne d' Arc.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we discussed the meaning and role of national symbols in the formation of French nationalism from the period of absolute monarchy to the Third République, focusing on two national symbols, the Roman Emperor and Vercingetorix, as case studies. National symbols, whether they are the ideas of the rulers or the people, have an impact on people's minds and can inspire them. This is connected to the notion of "interpretant" introduced in Peirce's semiotic theory. In that sense, the two national symbols can be considered as representative examples.

During the reign of Louis XIV, we can see the process by which he incorporated the image of the Roman Emperor and symbolized himself as "Louis=Auguste," finally giving the impression that he himself was the symbol of public power of the state. After the French Revolution, in the Third Republic gained by the people, the national symbol shifted from the representation of an absolute monarch to that of Napoléon I, a military general. However, despite the differences of their intentions, Louis XIV and Napoléon I both looked to Roman Emperors as the national symbol upon which to base themselves.

Napoléon III had somewhat different intentions. His rule was founded on two contradictory aspects: an absolute monarch, and a ruler who was close to the people. The transition of the political situation is reflected by the significance he gave to national symbols. Thus, the Roman emperor and Vercingetorix can be considered national symbols in the formation of French nationalism during that period.

However, this raises the question of why he gave new consideration to Vercingetorix. It is probably because he was anxious for a historically older foundation of the state of France, i.e., Gaul, and for this reason constructed the statue of Vercingetorix, an ethnic hero of Gaul. It is not clear whether, at this point, he was positioning the notion of Gaul as a common element for the French nation. However, his introduction of Vercingetorix prepared for a future transition of the national symbol.

As a consequence, his efforts to construct the heroic statue of Vercingetorix generated historical awareness among the French at that time. As mentioned in Section 4, Napoléon III favored the spirit of Bonapartism, as seen through his creation of a national holiday on Napoléon I's birthday. This signifies that he did not adopt the spirit of the Revolution, but rather that of the reign of Napoléon I. Similarly, his focus on ancient Rome can be found in his writing, "*Histoire de Jules César*," where he aimed to present the details of the heroic emperor's war.

Therefore, both Napoléon I and Napoléon III took the Caesar as a national symbol, but their attitudes toward the Roman emperor were different. Napoléon I, after the Revolution had rejected Roman tradition and heritage, developed a more liberal state, incorporating new features. It is probably because of this that Napoléon I identified himself with Caesar. Napoléon III also equated Caesar and Napoléon I, but he focused on Vercingetorix in the story of Caesar, highlighting him as a national hero. However, it is not clear whether he thought of Vercingetorix as being equal to Caesar.

In the discussion above, what is important is the fact that Napoléon III introduced the symbol of Vercingetorix into the state history. Vercingetorix became a common factor for the French nation and was positioned as a base

of their ethnic origin. The symbol did not play a role politically for “the unification of the state;” rather, it supported “the unification of national consciousness and mentality.” In fact, during the Third République, it was applied for the unification and integration of components of the nation-state. However, it was Napoléon III who paved the way for this, and it is therefore important to discuss Napoléon III’s political attitude and aims along with the nation’s understanding and vision for both their ruler and his state.

Certainly, national symbols have an impact on people’s minds and inspire them. Between the Second Empire and the Third République, the national symbols shifted from the Roman Emperor to Vercingetorix. The latter encouraged a new consciousness of France as a nation. Through this, one can appreciate the role and importance of national symbols.

Acknowledgment:

The author wishes to thank Professor Michel Thompson for his invaluable suggestions and advice.

Notes

- 1) Cassirer, Ernst, *An Essay on Man*, Yale University Press, 1992, p.27.
- 2) Apostolidés, Jean- Marie, *Le Roi-Machine -spectacle et politique au temps de louis XIV-*, Édition de Minuit, 1981, p.68.
- 3) King, Anthony, Vercingetorix, Asterix and the Gauls: Gallic symbols in French politics and culture, *Journal of Roman archaeology. Supplementary series*, Vol. 44, 2001, p.116.
- 4) Napoléon III, *Histoire de Jules César*, Tome 2, p.459. /Paris Edition Errance, 2001, p.202-203.
- 5) King, Anthony, Vercingetorix, Asterix and the Gauls : Gallic symbols in French politics and culture, *Journal of Roman archaeology. Supplementary series*, Vol. 44, 2001, p.116.
- 6) Bruno, G., *Le Tour de la france par deux enfants*, Paris, 2000, pp.135-136.