



# *Dallas-Fort Worth Society*

## *dfwarchaeological.org*

*Excavate • Educate • Advocate*

---

### *From Gaul to France: Caesar, Vercingetorix, and the Anxiety of Defeat*

---

After Caesar defeated Vercingetorix at Alesia in 52 BCE, he paraded the conquered Gaul in his triumph in Rome, and produced a denarius, Rome's standard coin, showing Vercingetorix in profile, striking with his unkempt hair, long moustache, and gaunt features. This image gave Romans a close-up view of Rome's enemy, and greatly contributed to Caesar's prestige and renown as Gaul became a pacified Roman province. In 1837, the first ancient coin inscribed with the name of Vercingetorix was discovered in France, a Gallic coin likely minted by Vercingetorix himself in 52 BCE. The appearance of this coin publicized the ancient Gaul to a society looking for national heroes in a century in which national identity was being formed and shaped by symbols, history, and myth. Thus Napoleon III erected a statue of Vercingetorix near Alesia in 1867, and Auguste Bartholdi, the sculptor of the Statue of Liberty, created a second statue of Vercingetorix on horseback crushing a Roman soldier for placement near Gergovie, where Vercingetorix had defeated Caesar earlier in 52 BCE. After France's humiliating loss in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, an amplified display of nationalism paired Vercingetorix with Joan of Arc. French painters focused on transforming Vercingetorix's defeat at Alesia into a virtual victory, reflecting the need for such a transformation after the Franco-Prussian War. Similar engravings of Vercingetorix's meeting with Caesar are found in popular French history books of the period; there also arose a cottage industry of books about Vercingetorix. Medalists likewise turned their attention to Vercingetorix, and popular culture embraced Vercingetorix in advertisements on chocolate boxes, spring water, and cufflinks, while an early French movie featured Vercingetorix as France's first action hero. Vercingetorix found his apotheosis in the wildly popular comics series *Asterix*, bringing him full-circle back to Gaul's interactions with the Romans, but with a newly invented rebellious twist, reflecting France's need to manage its anxieties of defeat, beginning with the Romans, with tales of victory and conquest.

**About the Speaker:** Marsha McCoy is a Roman historian and archaeologist with degrees from Bryn Mawr College, Oxford University, Harvard University, and Yale University. She has held a Fulbright Fellowship in Munich, Germany, and a Mellon Fellowship at New York University, and is the Vice-President of the AIA-DFW Society. Her areas of research include Cicero, Augustan culture, and Roman numismatics. She has given numerous papers at the national AIA meeting and elsewhere, and is working on a book on Caesar, Vercingetorix, and their reception in France.