In the 5th and early 4th centuries BC, migratory Germanic tribes pressured Gallic Celts to push South in search of new territory. They were likely familiar with north central Italy, from trade arrangements. The Gauls crossed the Alps en masse capturing and settling Etruscan territory by force. The Gallic tribes were united only by blood and origin and each maintained their own kings or warlords. Some of these tribes settled into cattle and cereal farming along with peaceful cohabitation, but others maintained aggressive policies towards their new neighbors.

One such tribe, the Senones, was under the command of a Brennus, who led his Celts to the Etruscan city of Clusium about 100 miles north of Rome. The Clusians were understandably terrified by the hordes of Celts on their doorstep and sent to Rome for help. Rome, weakened by recent wars, sent a delegation of three ambassadors, the Fabii brothers, to negotiate the situation.

When negotiations broke down, the Clusians sent an army to force the Senones off the land. At this point, the Roman historian [Livy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Livy) stated that the Roman ambassadors "broke the [law of nations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jus_gentium)" (that is, broke their oath of neutrality as ambassadors) "and took up arms" against the Senones. In the resulting action, Quintus Fabius, an ambassador and a member of a powerful family, killed one of the Gallic leaders (a chieftain). When the Senones realized that the sacred trust of the ambassador was broken, they withdrew from battle to discuss the issue.[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Allia#cite_note-2)

The Senones sent their own ambassadors to Rome, demanding the Fabians be handed over to them for justice. Many Romans (especially priests) were sympathetic, and agreed that it was a breach of the law of nations. However, the Roman masses mocked the priests, and the Ambassadors were lauded in Rome and appointed Military tribunes with consular powers. This was a great dishonour to the Gallic delegation and they left the city claiming they would return.

The Senones marched on Rome covering 130km in three days. Surprisingly, they did no pillaging along the way, shouting at settlements as they past tem that they meant them no harm and their destination was the city of Rome. On July 18 387 BC, about 24,000 Roman soldiers faced a Celtic army of about half that number at the Allia, a tributary to the Tiber. This was in the times before the Roman military had become the well oiled war machine that conquered the world and was more like a militia comprised of the wealthier citizens in the middle of the battle cluster, with the poorer on the frontline and flanks – who had to bring their own weapons.

In one of Rome’s biggest militaristic failures the 6 Roman legions were decimated in battle with more than half slain on the first meeting. The remainder fled into the city, but failed to close the gates allowing the Gauls to sack the city, rape and pillage till their hearts content, the whole city’s archive of records and historical documents was destroyed. The remaining Roman forces took refuge on the Capitoline Hill, a raised fortress that contained the Temple of Juno, on a steep hill with high walls that was stand-off then occurred as the Gauls considered how to attack the Capitol.

At this point, the besieged Roman soldiers in Veii needed to get a message to the Senate in order to reinstate [Marcus Furius Camillus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcus_Furius_Camillus) as the dictator and general, and so a messenger climbed a steep cliff the Gauls had neglected to guard. The messenger left with the Senate's approval, but the Gauls noticed this path onto the hill, and decided to use it to launch a sneak attack at night. But according to legend [Marcus Manlius Capitolinus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcus_Manlius) was alerted to the Gallic attack by the sacred [geese](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geese) of [Juno](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juno_(mythology)) ("the Capitoline geese"), who with a great amount of squawking and flapping alerted the Romans to their attackers’ position. The Romans then attacked for their advantageous position and the Gauls sustained severe losses.

The Romans engaged with Brennus for terms that would ensure that the Celts depart and Brennus apparently agreed to leave Rome for the price of 1,000 lbs. of gold. There are theories that the Celts were paying heavy tolls from disease, or that there own settlements to the north were under attack by other Italian tribes. Whatever the reason, Brennus accepted the terms and agreed to leave. The following passage from Livy, regarding these terms, leaves us with one of the most famous lines accredited to a barbarian chief in dealings with Rome.

“*Quintus Sulpicius conferred with the Gallic chieftain Brennus and together they agreed upon the price, one thousand pounds' weight of gold. Insult was added to what was already sufficiently disgraceful, for the weights which the Gauls brought for weighing the metal were heavier than standard, and when the Roman commander objected the insolent barbarian flung his sword into the scale, saying 'Vae Victis-- 'Woe to the vanquished!"*

According to some Roman historians, it was in this very moment that Camillus arrived with a Roman army and, after putting his sword on the scale, replied, "Not gold, but steel redeems the native land," thus attacking the Gauls. A battle ensued in the streets of Rome, but neither army could fight effectively in the narrow streets and alleyways. The Gallic and Roman armies left the city and fought the next day. Camillus' army lived up to his hopes and the Gallic army was routed.

With the departure of Brennus and his Gauls, many Romans wanted to abandon their city and move to the nearby city of Veii, but reverence for the gods and the divine will of Roma alleviated this concern. The Romans obviously decided to stay, and quickly rebuilt the city. The Romans also began restructuring their military organization: They ceased using the Greek [phalanx](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phalanx_formation) style spear and adopted better and more standardized armour and weapons. Many historians speculate that the Romans learned much about weapons technology and battle tactics from this run-in with the Senones. Though only a single tribe, the Senones were part of the much larger culture of Celts (or Gauls) that had more advanced iron-working and close-quarter combat techniques. Specifically, the Celts/Gauls used heavier long swords and full body shields, which allowed them to interlock shields for greater defense (a tactic later named "tortoise" (*testudo*) in the Roman histories).

The military system that resulted remained the basis of all Roman armies for the next few centuries, as well as the instrument that made possible the Roman Empire.

The defeat at the hands of the Gauls was the last time the city of Rome was captured by non-Roman forces [until AD 410](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sack_of_Rome_(410)).