

**Teifion Gambold, *Culture of Conflict? Trans-Rhenish Exchange
and the Transformation of the 'Roman World'*.**

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Beard states in a Gifford lecture given in 2019 that the idea that has prevailed of the 'ancient Roman' typically remains one of a togate and Italic figure.¹ This may trace all the way back to the elite writers of Imperial Rome, suggested by Kulikowski's identification of the first century CE writer Tacitus' ethnographic device of comparing "...chaste and upright..." barbarians with "...licentious..." Romans in his *Germania*.² The Roman and Late Roman periods in western Europe – which is the chronological and geographical focus of this paper – corresponds to approximately the first century CE through to the fifth century CE. It is notable that the ideology of natural separation between the Roman and the non-Roman remained consistent throughout this period. The concept of a 'Germanic threat' to the Roman Empire, which was played up for political purposes by the Roman Imperial elite in their ideology of separation, has subsequently coloured scholarship.³

¹ Beard, 2019.

² Kulikowski, 2020: 19.

³ Drinkwater, 2007: 11, 12, 16, 22.

For example, the fourth century CE tutor, praetorian prefect, and statesman Ausonius is recorded lambasting a rival, Silvius Bonus, for his barbarous Britishness. According to imperial Roman ethnography, Britons were deceitful and untrustworthy.⁴ The irony is that Ausonius was himself born in Gaul; much like the Britons, Gauls were condemned as simple-minded and cowardly in accounts such as Strabo's (d. 29 CE) *Geography* which formed a literary basis of Imperial Roman ethnographic thinking.⁵

Despite the beliefs of elite writers and of some modern ancient historians, as Woolf perceptively notes in his examination of Roman Gaul there was no singular 'Roman' that an ancient person might strive to emulate. Woolf suggests the concept of the 'Roman' was instead encapsulated through cultural trends specific to varying time periods and locations. While the aspects that conceptualised Roman culture were consistently debated between the 'insider' and 'outsider', often causing conflict, building materials, use of the Latin language, certain pottery typologies, and costume are markers to note.⁶

The area under investigation in this paper is the Rhine frontier. The view of the '*Limesland*' – the frontier zones which defined the outermost edge of Roman civil administration – has changed greatly since frontier studies coalesced. The first international congress of frontier studies only occurred after the Second World War in 1949.⁷ Along the northern frontier on the European mainland, generally comprising the Rhine and Danube rivers as main components, it is now considered that signs of significant trans-frontier

⁴ Ausonius, *Epigrams*, CVII-CXII; Halsall, 2007: 54.

⁵ Strabo, *Geography*: IV.5; Halsall, 2007: 48.

⁶ Woolf, 1998: 11, 1-2, 6-7; Heather, 2005: 58.

⁷ von Schnurbein, 2005: 59; Breeze, 2017: ix.

cultural and economic contact are often exhibited;⁸ Roman political domination extended as far as the Elbe by the end of the first century BCE.⁹ However, arguments such as Heather's are still prevalent: the peoples beyond the Rhine were too politically fragmented, and too impoverished, to be conquered.¹⁰ Certainly, the decentralised and somewhat undeveloped nature of the landscape may have acted to stymie ideas of a similar form of military conquest as in Gaul.¹¹

That being said, our understanding of this region is incomplete; it would be a critical error to believe that these people in no way participated in Roman culture.¹² This article seeks to highlight that rather than the civilian cultural experience, those living outside the provinces were more often influenced by Roman martial culture and the identity expression of the military. 'Germanic' groups often settled in the vicinity of military sites; and militarised cultural norms were expressed through 'economic warfare', soldiers acting as officials, and the military service of members of external groups within the Romans' imperial armies.¹³ Interaction with the Roman military spanned centuries, and – while likely asymmetrical – integration of military identity expression is detectible.¹⁴ A number of consistent factors can be found throughout the period which clearly suggest that many so-called

⁸ Galestin, 2017; von Schnurbein, 2005.

⁹ Drinkwater, 2007: 16.

¹⁰ Heather, 2005: 47-48, 54-55, 56, 57.

¹¹ Drinkwater, 2007: 20.

¹² Meyer et al., 2017: 298.

¹³ Drinkwater, 2007: 38-39; Kerr, 1991; Ward, 2012: 224-232; Galestin, 2017: 280.

¹⁴ Drinkwater, 2007: 40; Halsall, 2007: 174.

‘barbarians’ were not outsiders but were actively within the Roman social landscape.

Military Culture

The cultural impact of the presence of the Roman military in the Rhine region was significant. The armies of the Roman and Late Roman periods were no longer the seasonal fighting forces they had been under the republic. Armies formed socially distinct communities focused around career soldiers, spread out in camps and forts, mostly along the imperial frontiers.¹⁵ The image should not, however, be of sterile professional environments: these locations were often thriving communities comprising not only soldiers but also traders and other camp followers, living alongside families of the fighting men.¹⁶

The military presence in the provinces was deeply intertwined in the imperial system, through occupations such as tax collection, policing, and price regulation. This is highly visible at borderland locations where the military exerted control over groups exporting goods into the empire.¹⁷ Military status, particularly for officers, grew sympathetically with their expanding roles in provincial regions. Soldiers with the title of ‘*beneficiarius*’ were involved extensively in trans-frontier contact.¹⁸ Centurions, unit leaders and fort commanders, could be admitted to the elite equestrian social class by

¹⁵ Gilliver, 2007: 183-184; James, 1999: 15; Hanel, 2007: 395, 398, 399; Keppie, 1984: 146.

¹⁶ Gardner, 2001: 43; Allason-Jones, 2017: 3-7; Vanhoutte and Verbrugge, 2017: 48-52.

¹⁷ Southern, 2007: 77, 81; Fuhrmann, 2012: 201-238; Ricci, 2011: 484, 489; Hanel, 2007: 395; Kerr, 1991: 442-444.

¹⁸ Speidel 2011: 5; Paetz gen. Schieck 2011: 93-94, footnote n.52 p.94; Southern 2007: 81-82; *Tab. Vindol.* 250; *L'Année Épigraphique* 1944 103/1950 105; von Schnurbein, 2005: 59.

the end of the second century CE and they could also act as *'regionarii'* who commanded whole geographical regions. While evidence is sparse, it does not seem unlikely that this behaviour impacted trans-Rhenish culture; at least one 'barbarian' leader, the Greuthungi leader Athanaricus, is called a 'judge' and the most powerful ruler among his people by Ammianus Marcellinus, perhaps comparable to the function of *'regionarii'* who also acted as magistrates.¹⁹

Of great significance to understanding the social impact of such individuals is understanding the distinct forms of identity expression military community possessed. The use of the sword and military belt created a unique auditory and visual presence around the Roman soldier that marked them out.²⁰ To have the military belt removed was a serious disciplinary measure in the Roman military, a humiliating punishment for those who failed in their duties or even allowed the unit standard to be lost.²¹ For titled soldiers such as centurions, staffs of office, unique belt fittings and highly decorative spearheads symbolised their elevated status.²² Such items created a strong corporate identity – an 'imagined community'.²³ It was this muscular cultural

¹⁹ Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*: XXVII.6; *Tab. Vindol.*, 250; *L'Année Épigraphique*, 1944 103/1950 105; Southern, 2007: 81-82.

²⁰ Speidel 2011: 1, 5; Esmonde Cleary, 2013: 45-46; Gardner, 2001: 38.

²¹ Livy, *History of Rome*: XIII.9; Suetonius, *Divus Augustus*: 24.

²² Speidel, 2011: 3, 5, 7; Bishop and Coulston, 2006: 10; Paetz gen. Schieck, 2011: 93-94, footnote n.52 p.94; Southern, 2007: 81-82; D'Amato and Sumner, 2009: 48, 179, 276; James, 2004: 51.

²³ James, 1999: 15.

identity expression which was so visible in interactions with neighbouring peoples and must have influenced their perceptions of Roman identity.

A Culture of Conflict

Central to the adoption and adaptation of Roman identity by ‘native’ groups is the idea that the area across the Rhine was politically fragmented, but was not beyond Roman control.²⁴ Rivers such as the Rhine were ancient highways for goods and people, not barriers.²⁵ As demonstrated by the road and canal system recently discovered at Nijmegen, and the attestation of Tacitus, the Roman army was no exception: the river was key to keeping the soldiers supplied.²⁶ It is furthermore evident that although Heather may be correct in his assessment that the ‘Jastorf culture’ and the ‘La Tène culture’ predominated on opposing riverbanks, this never prohibited ancient societies from straddling the river.²⁷ Several tribal groups such as the Menapii and Volcae Tectosages lived on both banks simultaneously during Caesar’s time.²⁸

The arrival of the Romans placed the imperial military into this trans-Rhenish landscape. A fort was established across the Rhine at Waldgirmes under Augustus (r.27 BCE-14 CE), and a significant number of ‘garrisons’ were present on the eastern bank during the reign of Claudius I (r. 41-54 CE).²⁹ Nor was this a limited practice: ‘Hunt’s *Pridianum*’ (105 CE) claims

²⁴ Heather, 2005: 47-48, 54-55, 56, 57.

²⁵ Heather, 2005: 55-56.

²⁶ AFP, 2021; Tacitus, *Annales*: XIII.LIII.

²⁷ Heather, 2005: 49-53 (Map 2), 56.

²⁸ Caesar, *Gallic War*: II.4, IV.4; Whittaker, 1994: 74.

²⁹ Drinkwater, 2007: 39; Tacitus, *Annales*: XIX, XIII.LIV.

that an expedition similarly crossed the frontier on the Danube to defend the 'annona' – the military supplies – located there.³⁰

The Frisians present an intriguing case study: this group occupied territory on the Atlantic coast, some distance north of the Rhine, during the Roman period but disappear textually in the Late Roman period. Following a conflict with the Frisians, the Romans required them to host a military 'praesidium', as well as to institute a senate and magistrates.³¹ This is noticeably similar to a post-war treaty with the Marcomanni, which required that they could only meet in the presence of a Roman military centurion.³² With this integration, it is arguable that shared identity as a Roman soldier became a vehicle for a trans-Rhenish socio-political network.

For instance, the Frisians' defeat by the Romans may have resulted in the institution of a new elite, as Frisian society was still largely decentralised and agrarian at this point in time.³³ Halsall contends that the Romans not infrequently instituted leaders for groups without clear hierarchies, and Latin titlature was likely often attributed to such Roman-sponsored leaders. This may have emphasised the increasingly prominent Roman material culture surrounding 'Germanic' rulership evident in archaeological contexts throughout the period.³⁴ Imperial links certainly seem to have become substantial for the Frisians: more than a-hundred sites have attested Roman

³⁰ Whittaker, 1994: 113-114.

³¹ Tacitus, *Annales*, XIX; Whittaker, 1994: 89.

³² Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, LXXIII.2.4; Ward, 2012: 238.

³³ Galestin, 2017: 280.

³⁴ Halsall, 2007: 123-124, 183.

ceramic finds;³⁵ Frisian territory was heavily occupied by military suppliers and camp followers (*'negotiatores'* and *'lixae'*); Latin could be used for the signing of contracts such as loans, and centurions could be called upon to act as witnesses.³⁶

At the site of Hatsum, the Netherlands, two characteristic Iron Age *'terpen'* mounds were excavated in the earlier twentieth century by Albert Egges van Giffen. The two mounds, situated approximately five-hundred metres (500m) apart, have produced six-hundred (600) Samian ware sherds and some seventy (70) fragments of Roman-type roof tiles.³⁷ This may be interpreted as some significant evidence for cultural integration. Van Giffen notably failed to find a Roman-style house on the site; the *terpen* had been disturbed by commercial digging prior to excavation, meaning that the remains of such a building could have been lost before van Giffen's arrival, but no conclusions can be reached on this premise.³⁸ However, this visible adoption of Roman building techniques is certainly present in similar trans-frontier contexts, such as was identified at Gaukönigshofen and along several tributary rivers of the Rhine which may be suggestive of cultural interaction of a similar form at Hatsum.³⁹

The catalyst for such loci developing may well have been defeat by, and subsequent contact with, the Roman military. Economic contact through the Rhine highway was evidently significant; animal products and food were probably amongst the products sold to the imperial military.⁴⁰ The economic

³⁵ Galestin, 2017: 280.

³⁶ Whittaker, 1994: 113; Galestin, 2017: 281.

³⁷ Galestin, 2017: 280-281.

³⁸ Woolf, 1998: 11; Galestin 2017: 281.

³⁹ von Schnurbein, 2005: 59; Drinkwater, 2007: 20, 36.

⁴⁰ Galestin, 2017: 281.

relationship between garrisons and trans-Rhenish settlements, such as those identified at Wijster and Bennekom, continued to strengthen up into the fourth century CE.⁴¹ The elites living at Hatsum can be seen as a part of this broader context.

Throughout the trans-Rhenish region, elite practices increasingly adapted to the presence of the Roman military, such as the prestige and political power that was often invested in successful warrior-leaders.⁴² Trans-Rhenish auxiliaries were recruited from at least the time of Caesar and were notably employed during the first century CE.⁴³ One such was the Frisian Cruptorix. He is mentioned by Tacitus as an ex-soldier, possessing an estate large enough to house four-hundred soldiers, in the reign of Tiberius (r.14-37 CE).⁴⁴ This likely places him within the local elite. Frisian units are attested in texts from Britain between the second and third centuries CE; warrior-elites such as Cruptorix may therefore have continued to form a cultural bridge between the empire and their people.⁴⁵ It is plausible that these men were able to greatly enhance their status by exploiting the military identity they gained through military service. Indeed, Haynes has suggested that perhaps half of all Roman land forces were made up of non-citizens, which likely included a substantial number of people from across the Rhine.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Halsall, 2007: 125, 126.

⁴² Halsall, 2007: 124.

⁴³ Demandt, 2013: 161; Drinkwater, 2007: 25, 41; Halsall, 2007: 102.

⁴⁴ Tacitus, *Annales*: IV.LXXIII; Whittaker, 1994: 113.

⁴⁵ RIB: 882, 883, 1036, 1594; c.f. *Tab. Vindol.* 861 (Frisian possibly named).

⁴⁶ Haynes, 2013: vii.

Manpower demands only increased in these regions during the second and third centuries CE.⁴⁷ Disease may have caused a decline in the population of the empire, reducing the available pool of recruits from within the provinces.⁴⁸ Fischer notes that the ‘Germanic’ tribes across the frontier were a ready source of additional manpower from the reign of Marcus Aurelius (r.161-180 CE).⁴⁹ There must have been cultural implications; the Romans often incorporated the military structures of neighbouring civilisations into their own forces when they absorbed them, and while no formal annexation occurred in cases like the Frisians, these groups may have been largely integrated into the Roman military system.⁵⁰

Violent interaction, however, was not only defined by the aggression of the Romans. It was through conflict that political leaders often sought to redress the balance of power. Cross-border raiding was effectively a fact of frontier life.⁵¹ While Nero was emperor (r.54-68 CE), the Frisians used the threat of conflict to attempt to gain concessions: when the Romans seemed reluctant to send expeditions of troops across the Rhine, two powerful leaders – potentially former Roman auxiliaries like Cruptorix – brought their people to farm territory on the eastern bank of the Rhine given over to the Roman military’s use.⁵² Only with the grant of Roman citizenship to these leaders, and a force of auxiliary cavalry had driven off the Frisians, did the unrest end.⁵³

⁴⁷ Drinkwater, 2007: 145.

⁴⁸ Demandt, 2013: 162.

⁴⁹ Fischer 2019: 53, 84.

⁵⁰ Haynes, 2013: 66.

⁵¹ Drinkwater, 2007: 30.

⁵² Drinkwater, 2007: 22.

⁵³ Tacitus, *Annales*, XIII.LIV.

The Tencteri similarly utilised the political instability caused by the Civilis Revolt of 70 CE, begun by a Batavian prince who was himself also a Roman military officer, to overthrow Roman restrictions on their crossings of the Rhine.⁵⁴ They were aggrieved at the Roman military's impositions, which included a tax and placed the Tencteri under guard.⁵⁵ Similar confrontations would continue: as the recent discovery of the great battle-site at Harzhorn suggests, the army was still fighting major actions deep inside 'barbarian' territory well into the third century CE.⁵⁶ The emperor Valens (r.364-378 CE) fought a three-year war with the Greuthungi who had obtained favourable terms from the Romans during a period of political instability for the empire.⁵⁷ These studies are evidence that interactions in the trans-Rhine region were firmly the preserve of the Roman military and martial forces of neighbouring groups: in peacetime through recruitment practices; in politics through the use of conflict to renegotiate treaty terms; and economics where the Roman military supervised any crossings.

The End Result?

⁵⁴ Drinkwater, 2007: 23.

⁵⁵ Kerr, 1991: 443; Tacitus, *Histories*, Book IV.LXIV.

⁵⁶ Meyer et al., 2017: 298-303.

⁵⁷ Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*: XXVII.6; Kerr, 1991: 443.

These practices and conflicts became key to identity expression across the trans-Rhenish area.⁵⁸ Groups like the Frisians and their neighbours were exposed to the militant identity fostered by serving the Roman imperial military and by clashing against this same institution. There were cultural repercussions: exchanges of equipment and customs increasingly begin to appear amongst trans-Rhenish material culture, visible in the archaeological and historical record, during the Late Roman period.⁵⁹

As the Roman military apparently began to adopt ‘barbarian’ practices, significant deposits of Roman equipment have been found at twenty sites across northern Germany, Denmark and Sweden from the same period. While these finds may represent war trophies, it is plausible that at least some of this material was obtained as a result of military service.⁶⁰ By the fourth century CE, ‘barbarians’ were allegedly fighting with the ‘*bebra*’, which was apparently modelled explicitly on the earlier Roman ‘*pila*’.⁶¹ The so-called ‘*barritus*’ war cry, allegedly ‘Germanic’ in origin, was apparently used by Late Roman soldiers.⁶² Vegetius’ claims are not certain, given his lack of personal military experience, but the archaeological record appears to corroborate these assertions.⁶³

Fischer contends that military belt typology of the Late Roman period becomes noticeably ‘German’ in design;⁶⁴ examples – from Cuxhaven for

⁵⁸ Halsall, 2007: 123.

⁵⁹ Halsall, 2007: 57-58,

⁶⁰ Bishop and Coulston, 2006: 31-32; Halsall, 2007: 102-103.

⁶¹ Vegetius, *Epitome of Military Science*: I.20.

⁶² Vegetius, *Epitome of Military Science*: III.18: trans. N.P. Milner, 1996: 101, footnote 2; Halsall, 2007: 103.

⁶³ Allmand, 2011: 397; Bishop and Coulston, 2006: 200.

⁶⁴ Fischer, 2019: 92.

example – can attest, however, the same functionality and symbolism persisted.⁶⁵ Dangling decorative terminals on such Late Roman examples would still have produced the characteristics of the Roman military belt.⁶⁶ ‘Germanic’ dress items, including locally produced brooches, were used to consciously emulate Roman status expression.⁶⁷ This may suggest an integration of military identity expression into ‘Germanic’ dress, part of a much broader synthesis of eastern and western Rhenish material culture in this period. ‘*Tutulusfibeln*’ brooches, and a bronze neck-ring, both of recognisably eastern-Rhenish typology, have been found at the Roman forts of Krefeld-Gellep and Oudenburg, which adds to the suggestion of an increasing commonality in expression between the ‘Romans’ on the western riverbank and the ‘non-Romans’ on the eastern riverbank.⁶⁸

Even further afield, Dyhrfeld-Johnsen hypothesises that a variation on the ‘Charon’s payment’ custom was present among Scandinavian elites in both Denmark and Norway in this period, with several ‘weapon graves’ attesting this practice. Dyhrfeld-Johnsen posits this may represent a similar phenomenon to the Frisians, whereby former Roman auxiliaries returned home with knowledge and practices of the Roman military integrated into their identity expression.⁶⁹ Relatively large settlements of peoples from across the frontiers were never entirely uncommon and continued into the Late

⁶⁵ c.f. James, 2004: 79-91; Bishop and Coulston, 2006: 221-223.

⁶⁶ c.f. Bishop and Coulston, 2006: 110, 254; Hoss, 2011: 30.

⁶⁷ Halsall, 2007: 58, 123.

⁶⁸ Esmonde Cleary, 2013: 343; Vanhoutte and Verbrugge, 2017: 49.

⁶⁹ Dyhrfeld-Johnsen, 2017: 269-270.

Roman period such as with the absorption of a Sarmatian group in 334 CE.⁷⁰ Thus, momentum for a such a wide-ranging cultural network may lie with such movements, and the recruitment of eastern Rhenish warriors into the army. This had arguably become habitual and substantial by the later third and fourth centuries CE.⁷¹

Conclusions

In sum, the narrative of the transformation of the ‘Roman world’ must change to reflect the fact that trans-Rhenish peoples were not outsiders, or ignorant of Roman cultural norms. Rather, it must be acknowledged that the Roman culture to which these peoples were exposed was the martial culture of the Roman military community. The traditions of the elite which existed before the arrival of the empire were adapted by experiences fighting both with and against Roman soldiers.⁷² This cultural phenomenon spanned hundreds of kilometres beyond the ‘*Limesland*’ of the empire, encompassing areas as diverse as the Netherlands, Denmark, and central Germany. Movement of such peoples into the empire in the Late Roman period produced incomers such as Franks who identified as equally Roman, and fifth century CE warlords like Odovacar (died, 493 CE) who became integrated as Roman aristocrats, generals, and statesmen.

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⁷⁰ de Ste. Croix, 1981: 510-516; Halsall, 2007: 176.

⁷¹ Drinkwater, 2007: 145; Bishop and Coulston, 2006: 199.

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