Social Dynamics in the Northwest Frontiers of the Late Roman Empire

BEYOND DECLINE OR TRANSFORMATION

N. Roymans, S. Heeren, W. De Clercq

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EDITORS

NICO ROYMANS, STIJN HEEREN & WIM DE CLERCQ

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PREFACE

This volume is a collection of papers originally delivered at a Round Table Conference held in Tongeren (Belgium) on 15-16 January 2015, entitled *Decline and Fall? Social dynamics in the Late Roman Northwest (AD 270-450)*. The conference was part of a research project with the same title, carried out at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (NL) and Ghent University (B) in the framework of Flemish-Dutch cooperation, funded by the Dutch Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) and the Research Fund Flanders (FWO). The project started in the spring of 2012 and ended in 2016.

The central aim of the project also lies at the heart of the current publication: to present a new and innovative analysis of the Late Roman period in the northwestern provinces of the empire, thereby drawing on the wealth of new archaeological evidence gathered in the past few decades. Traditionally the Late Roman period is defined as the years between AD 270 and 450. Although the research period and some contributions to this volume also discuss developments in the earlier 3rd century, most of the research focuses on the far-reaching changes that took place in the 4th and early 5th centuries. The end of effective Roman state authority and the swiftly changing relationship between the Roman state and external forces, as well as regional variety in the shape and pace of several developments, are key issues in this volume.

We would like to express our gratitude to NWO and FWO for funding the research, and the participants of the Tongeren conference for their papers and their contributions to the discussions. We thank the Gallo-Romeins Museum in Tongeren for providing hospitality during the conference. Furthermore, we express our gratitude to anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier draft of this book. It goes without saying that the responsibility for the contents remains with the authors and editors. Finally, we would like to thank Bert Brouwenstijn and Jaap Fokkema for the cartography and layout of the current volume, and Annette Visser (New Zealand) for checking the English of several papers. In July 2016 we received the sad news that Kenneth Painter passed away. We are very grateful for his contribution to this volume.

Nico Roymans / Stijn Heeren / Wim De Clercq
Amsterdam/Ghent, 25 October 2016

Introduction. New perspectives on the Late Roman Northwest

Nico Roymans / Stijn Heeren

I IMPERIAL POWER AND FRONTIER DYNAMICS

Since the appearance of Gibbon's seminal work *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1789), the final phase of the West Roman empire has always attracted much scholarly attention. Several key issues in the current debate are centuries-old and have been regularly revitalised. A remarkable constant in the discussion is the relation between imperial authority and external 'barbarian' groups, and this interaction of endogenous and exogenous forces will be the point of departure of this volume. The Roman empire cannot be understood without considering the social dynamics in its frontier regions. This volume focuses on the social and cultural dynamics in the northwestern frontier zone during the 4th and 5th century, paying special attention to Germania Secunda and Britannia, regions where important new archaeological research has taken place in the last decades in combination with innovative theoretical discussions.

This volume proceeds from a broad historical perspective in which four main forces or pressure groups are distinguished that determined the developments in the frontier zones, respectively imperial authority, the Roman army, rural elites and barbarian groups outside the Roman world. First, the contours of this historical perspective are elaborated in the contribution of Peter Heather. Next, Raymond Brulet's paper concentrates on the changing organisation and strategies of the Late Roman army and its strongholds in the northwestern provinces. Departing from the paradigm of frontier defence, he addresses the basic question whether the military control of the frontier was determined by a pragmatic *ad hoc* policy or by an underlying central strategic concept. The value of the papers of both Heather and Brulet is that they apply, adapt and expand already existing ideas to the northwestern fringes of the empire, thereby setting the scene for the following papers.

The following studies by Nico Roymans, Fraser Hunter & Kenneth Painter and Vince Van Thienen are dealing with mobile material culture and its relevance for the study of changing power relations in the Late Roman world. Finally, the contributions by Alain Vanderhoeven, Stijn Heeren, Simon Esmonde Cleary and Rob Collins focus on regional developments in Germania Secunda and Britannia, thereby making full use of newly acquired archaeological data. The comparison between Germania and Britannia has proved important: observations made in one paper have gained significance in the contexts of other papers. Not all contributions aim to present new perspectives and contribute to theoretical debates. Alain Vanderhoeven's paper, for example, focuses on providing an overview of the results of new archaeological

fieldwork in the Late Roman town of Tongres, which enable us to understand the contemporary social transformations from an urban perspective. This volume of complementary papers provides a number of new insights and points for debate that can direct future research. Some topics will be discussed in greater detail below.

2 PRECIOUS METAL FLOWS AND IMPERIAL POWER

The papers by Hunter & Painter and Roymans study deposits of Roman precious metal, mostly hacked silver and coined gold, which are regularly found in the frontier regions of the Late Empire. Roymans' paper focuses on the gold flows from the imperial centre to Frankish groups living in Lower Germany on both sides of the Rhine. This gold influx offers us insight into changing power relations between imperial authorities and Germanic groups. Imperial authorities used the gold payments for buying off of peace and stability and for the exploitation of the military potential of non-Roman groups. Roymans observes a considerable diachronic and regional variation in the imperial gold influx and tries to connect this to historically documented political interaction between Frankish groups and Roman authorities. Finally he addresses the question of the wider impact of the regular payments of gold tributes to frontier groups on the Roman state finances. This financial perspective on the decline of the Roman empire has been underexplored to date.

The papers of Hunter & Painter and Roymans show interesting differences between precious metal circulation in the Lower Rhine area and the British frontier regions. In the Lower Rhine region the influx of Roman gold plays a much larger role than in the British frontier, where Roman silver, and in particular *Hacksilber,* clearly dominates. How should we interpret such differences? Hunter & Painter consider two options, the first one being different cultural choices of local groups; frontier groups in Scotland may have preferred silver above gold. An alternative explanation may be a differentiated imperial policy. For the Roman authorities the military threat and the strategic importance of British frontier groups were relatively limited and did not require regular payments of gold subsidies. Were payments in silver satisfactory here to control these groups?

Important in this respect is the paper of Esmonde Cleary, who does not study precious metal specifically, but notes a diminished supply of Britain's northern frontier from the second half of the 4th century onwards. Although Collins, in contrast to Esmonde Cleary, sees continued army presence and supply to Hadrians Wall, he too notes a rather peaceful transition instead of the upheavals of war. The relative stability, resulting in a diminished imperial attention, seems an important background to explain the presence of silver instead of gold in this province.

Another interesting topic is how to understand the drying up of the Roman gold influx in the mid-5th century Lower Germanic frontier zone. Opinions vary on this theme. According to Roymans this marks the end of effective Roman authority in this region. Heather, on the other hand, interprets this as an indication for a successful restauration of Roman authority; it was no longer necessary for the emperor to buy peace with gold payments.[1] This latter interpretation, however, seems to underestimate the impact the early 5th century gold influx had on the internal social organisation of Lower Rhine Frankish groups. The stagnation of the gold influx (after a clear peak in the early 5th century) must have been a direct threat to the continuation of the power position of Frankish warlords. We can imagine two scenario's: 1. disintegration of the warbands and the loss of the social position of their leaders; 2. a move of the leaders and their

[1] Cf. Roymans, this volume, 74, and Heather, this volume, 32.

[2] Childeric, buried at Tournai in c. 482, is generally seen as an ally or even an official of the Roman emperor. The gold objects in his grave, including approx. 100 solidi and many high-quality ornaments, probably represent gifts acquired from the emperor or one of his officials. Cf. Quast 2015, 233.

warbands to more southern areas in Belgic Gaul that were still under Roman control. Here, the Frankish leaders could still receive regular payments as allies of the emperor, thus enabling them to reproduce and further strengthen their power positions. This latter scenario corresponds well with the late 5th century presence of rivalling Frankish warleaders, including Childeric, in the southern half of Belgic Gaul.[2] They, or their fathers may have settled there a few decades earlier, coming from the Lower Rhine frontier zone. About 445 we hear from a battle at *vicus Helena* near Arras in North France, where the Roman general Aetius beat a Frankish army led by a king Chlodio, who then seems to have continued his position as a local Roman client king. This example shows that in the mid-5th century the southern move of Frankish groups to Northern France was well under way.[3] Against this background it is interesting to observe that many immigrant Frankish settlements from the early 5th century in the Lower Rhine/Meuse region were already abandoned after one or two generations. Although this requires further investigation, the stopping of the influx of Roman gold in the Lower Rhine region may be related to the mid-5th century southward migration of Frankish groups, as documented in the historical sources.[4]

3 THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF MIGRATION

Changes of all kinds in frontier situations were closely connected to the presence and pressure of external people living close by. Since Gibbon's study the phenomenon of migration has been a prominent academic subject, and archaeologists working from a cultural historical paradigm played an important role in the pioneer stages of migration studies.[5] In Anglophone processual archaeology an anti-migrationist attitude developed from the 1960s onwards, which preferred to explain changes in material assemblages in terms of exchange relations and changing identity-constructions, rather than by moving people.[6] The theme of migration became somewhat of an academic backwater, at least the archaeological treatment of migration. Although many arguments and cases have shown that anti-migrationist models provide valuable insights, the reality of ancient migration must not be questioned altogether.[7]

Several contributors to the current volume pay attention to migration in the Late Roman period. Heather discusses new tribal formations in the immediate foreland of the frontier and counts migration as one of the processes behind the new formations. Roymans argues for a connection between gold deposits in the Lower Rhine region and Frankish *foederati*, suggesting that migration of Frankish groups into the frontier area is reflected in the distribution pattern of gold hoards. Heeren specifically studies archaeological correlates for migration and concludes that mobilia (mainly pottery of foreign styles), distinct building traditions and indicators for diet, can be considered proxies for migrations. In the case of Germania Secunda, all three proxies are present and (in combination with regional discontinuities in habitation patterns) enable us to identify Germanic settlers on former provincial-Roman soil.

In the German archaeological tradition, migration and the ability of archaeologists to treat the phenomenon was questioned only recently. Methodologically, the research focused on devising distribution maps of particular types of object thought to be characteristic of certain ethnic groups. These distribution maps were seen as proof for migrations.[8] Looking back, we think that objects alone cannot reveal migration persuasively. Theoretical archaeology has argued convincingly that objects and peoples' ethnic identity cannot be equated since identities are complex, multi-layered and dynamic.[9] While some of the

3 Wightman 1985, 302-303; Dierkens/Périn 2003, 169 ff.

4 Blok 1968, 18; Wightman 1985, 303; Dierkens/Périn 2003.

5 Hakenbeck 2008.

6 For an overview of the debate, see Halsall 2000; Halsall 2007; Theuws 2009.

7 Burmeister 2000; Hakenbeck 2008; Halsall 2012.

8 Cf. Brather 2004, 239-275.

9 Cf. Cohen 1985; Jones 1997; Roymans 2004; Brather 2004; Derks/Roymans 2009.

older German conclusions regarding the immigration of *foederati* in the early 5th century are now recurring, there is no question of returning to the same methods. The re-vitalisation of the migration debate comes from new theoretical avenues as well as different methodical approaches and is backed up by a growing empirical dataset.

Additionally, future studies on 5th century migration should also include linguistic research, since linguistic change is not only determined by acculturation but also by migration.[10] Finally, the promising study of geochemical analysis of isotopes in dental enamel of buried individuals should be mentioned. This area of research is rapidly developing. While the results of strontium isotopes alone have their limitations, multi-isotope approaches reveal more precise results,[11] and will provide a new science-based data-set in the migration debate.

All these new approaches offer valuable contributions to the study of ancient migration. We observe that the scholarly attention for this topic is already 250 years old, but is still - or again - highly vital.

4 MATERIAL CULTURE AND THE ETHNIC DEBATE

The tradition of ethnic interpretation of material culture is over a century old. Since Gustav Kossinna formulated his thesis of *Kulturkreise* - regions of distinct material culture connected to the habitation area of a people – in 1911, a wide variety of objects has been interpreted in ethnic terms. Although this practice has attracted criticism in Anglophone archaeology as well as from theoretically-oriented German scholars,[12] ethnic labeling of artefacts is still widely used.[13] And since it is realised that the spatial distribution of objects almost never coincides with the territories of historically known tribal groups, there has been a tendency to reduce ethnic interpretation to broadly used macro-categories like 'Germans', 'Franks' or 'Alamanni'.

The identification of finds in terms of a simple classification of Germanic versus Roman is often problematic. Even if it can be proven that finds were produced beyond the imperial border, were these objects (and their wearers) then Germanic and utterly un-Roman? The problem becomes more pregnant in the case of Germanic federate groups along the Lower Rhine. Roymans shows that the use of Roman precious metals, both gold and silver, coined and uncoined, also had an ethnic dimension since they were used to buy the loyalty of Frankish federates. Heeren elaborates on the link between the precious metal deposits and settlements of distinctly transrhenish character. Their inhabitants were certainly of Germanic descent, but were paid by the Roman state to fight in the name of Rome. This enabled these people to profile themselves as Roman soldiers and assume a (partly) Roman identity, while in other situations they could cultivate their Germanic origin and identity. It is therefore less helpful to classify their material culture as either Roman or Germanic. The use of these labels should be restricted to issues of provenance, not of ethnic identity.

Since the publications of Böhme and Werner the ethnic debate in the Lower Rhine frontier is closely related to the concept of *foederati*, i.e. autonomous non-Roman groups that had some kind of treaty relationship with the imperial authorities.[14] While the role of *foederati* has been deconstructed in the past two decades when treating the grave ritual (the topic of the so-called 'weapon graves'),[15] several contributions of this volume now return to the subject, with different source material. As highlighted above, Roymans and Heeren treat precious metal deposits and built structures from settlements in the Lower Rhine region as indicators for federate groups; the *foederati* were probably the only groups that received gold payments from the Roman authorities in exchange for their military support.

[10] Blok 1981, 144-151; Lamarcq/Rogge 1996; Schrijver 2014, 153-154.

[11] Font *et al.* 2012; Font *et al.* 2015.

[12] Jones 1997; Brather 2000; idem 2004; Geary 2002; Härke 2004.

[13] See for example Quast 2009; Martin 2014.

[14] Böhme 1974; Werner 1958.

[15] Halsall 2000; 2007; Theuws 2009.

Interestingly, Collins uses the absence of large cemeteries and the continued use of Roman forts in northern England in the post-Roman period to argue for a slow transformation from Roman garrisons to warbands in Britannia. Sudden changes in burial ritual, for instance the appearance of cemeteries with furnished inhumation graves, have been associated with new ethnic formations or a dramatic change in social circumstances.[16] The fact that this did not happen in the north of England is taken as an indicator for relative stability by Collins. Along the Lower Rhine, however, sudden changes did take place, in the form of abandonment of the Rhine *limes* by the Roman troops and subsequent immigration of people of Germanic descent. Large cemeteries are present there. The role of warbands in shaping 5th-century society is important in both the North of Britain and in the Lower Rhine area, however, the developments in the 4th century in both areas show fundamental differences.

The problem of associating finds with certain social groups applies above all to the military or non-military interpretation of weapons and belt sets. Brulet argues that the distinction between the Roman field army (*comitatensis*), the Roman territorial army (*limitanei*) and external auxilia (*foederati*) is already problematic in the written sources. Collins and Esmonde Cleary show that archaeologists have even more difficulty to separate these groups on the basis of mobile material culture. While Collins argues for continued military presence along Hadrians Wall until the early 5th century and a smooth transformation in the following decades, Esmonde Cleary studies the coin distribution and military belts and argues for a much earlier separation of the North from the longer supported south of Britannia. The problems attached to interpreting material finds are partly explained by the shifting meaning of material culture. Van Thienen shows that even the crossbow brooch, often taken as the indicator for the Roman army, had different meanings and contexts of use that evolved over time.

Many scholars have put into perspective the importance of ethnic identities in the past by emphasizing their flexible nature.[17] Ward-Perkins, however, warns us not to over-emphasize the dynamic character of ethnic identities of individuals in Late Roman society.[18] For example, the different blood-prices in the *Lex Salica* indicate us that the distinction between Franks and Romans was still felt significant around AD 500. The break-down of ethnic boundaries between 'barbarians' and 'Romans' seems to have been a gradual process that took several generations. Indeed, the material correlates of these groups remain uncertain, but this should not lead us to judge the distinctions to be unimportant.

We suspect that the ethnic debate, the role of external *foederati* and the material representations of various group cultures will be at the forefront of research in the time to come. We argue here that a long-term perspective and the inclusion of various classes of evidence is more helpful than rigid oppositions or too specific labels borrowed from the written sources.

5 TOWN–COUNTRYSIDE RELATIONS

From the days of Augustus until the 5th century AD the basic units of the Roman imperial administration were the *civitates*, consisting of an urban center and its surrounding countryside. The landowning elite controlled the administration of the cities as well as the rural peasantry.[19] As Heather reminds us in his contribution, the landowning elite was a major pillar in the imperial control of the empire. In return for the tax they paid, the rights and interests of the landowning elites were central concerns of the emperor and the decision-making body around him. The ties between the central government and the regions, as well as between town and country remained strong into the Late Roman period.

16 Halsall 2000; 2007; Theuws 2009.

17 Geary 1983; Jones 1997; Roymans/Derks 2009.

18 Ward-Perkins 2005, 78 ff.

19 Cf. Roymans/Derks 2011, 14-28; Heather. For the Late Roman period specifically: Esmonde Cleary 2015, ch. 6-7; Heather, this volume.

The basic question various authors pose is: how long into the Late Roman period did this basic structure remain intact? For the West-Roman empire, Heather argues that the bond between emperor, army and landowning elites remained strong way into the 5th century and did not break before the settlement of Visigoths and others in the heartland of Gaul, where most taxes were generated. At the fringes of the empire, however, land-loss occurred earlier. Heeren argues for the settlement of *foederati* in Germania Secunda and Belgica Secunda from the first decade of the 5th century already, but large depopulations north of the road Cologne-Tongeren-Bavay already occurred more than a century earlier. Minor though these losses were from an empire-wide perspective, it weakened landholding and thus tax-revenues in these provinces from the late 3rd century onwards.

The question is how long the basic structure of elite landholding remained functioning south of the road Cologne-Tongeren-Bavay. Although the Late Roman transformations of villa estates received scholarly attention in previous decades,[20] no good answers have been given as to the extent to which villas still generated surpluses to support the cities and to pay taxes. The phenomenon of 'squatter occupation', by which the settlement of post-built farmhouses and sunken huts on (former?) villa estates is meant, is described by various authors, but the question of a continued functioning of the traditional villa system remains unclarified.[21]

Although the current volume contains no contribution to fill this research gap, we see it as an important direction for future research. South of the road Cologne-Tongeren-Bavay many Roman-style villas survived the so-called 'crisis of the 3rd century',[22] but the question is of how long they remained in use. Did they all stop producing in the early 5th century, or is this a matter of archaeological visibility? And how does this rural evidence relate to the development of urban elite dwellings in the last surviving *civitas* centres of Germania Secunda, Tongeren and Cologne? Vanderhoeven presents in his paper a clear picture of the situation in Tongeren. Urban *domus* – symbol of the land-owning elite – remain in function here until far into the 4th century, but they fall out of use around 400 and the town seems completely deserted around the mid-5th century.

6 BEYOND DECLINE OR TRANSFORMATION

Since the emergence of the school of Late Antiquity a marked break in the historiography of the Late Roman period is observed.[23] While Edward Gibbon and the following two centuries of scholarship voiced only the Roman perspective of a decline of imperial power, resulting in a narrative of impoverishment, loss of territory and ultimately the 'fall' of the Roman empire, the school of Late Antiquity changed the perspective and described changes from the 3rd century onwards in a more positive way. The Late Roman period and Early Middle Ages were increasingly seen as a transformatory stage between the High Roman empire and the empire of Charlemagne.[24] It is argued that early medieval kingdoms are in no way inferior to the Roman empire and that the role of invading barbarian groups must not be overstated. Many areas prospered, unaffected by invasions, many institutions were continued, and situations developed gradually instead of suddenly. While Late Antiquity has proved very influential indeed, the change of perspective is not uncontested. The 'terrible twins of 2005',[25] two publications very different in terms of coverage, size and approach, have in common that they forcefully argued that barbarian groups from outside the empire

[20] Van Ossel/Ouzoulias 2000; Lenz 2001; Lewit 2003; Van Ossel 2006.

[21] See note 20, especially Lenz 2001; Lewit 2003.

[22] Lewit 2001; Ward-Perkins 2005, 1-10; Halsall 2007, 19-22 for concise overviews of the debate.

[23] Lewit 2001; Ward-Perkins 2005, 1-10; Halsall 2007, 19-22 for concise overviews of the debate.

[24] Brown 1971 and Webster/Brown 1997; Wickham 2005; Mitchell 2007.

[25] An epithet borrowed from Esmonde Cleary 2013, 1, referring to Heather 2005 and Ward-Perkins 2005.

were a prime mover towards the end of Roman authority and that violence and impoverishment were true factors in the decline of Roman state structures in the west.

The current volume does not choose between one school or another. Transformations are highlighted in for instance the paper of Brulet on the Late Roman army and the continental frontiers and the one by Collins on Britain's northern frontier. In the contribution of Heather, decline and fall is a central feature: the sudden breakdown of imperial authority is evident. Roymans' paper focuses on gold hoards and the very nature of this source material, which is supplied by the state and is found because of a drain of gold to barbarian groups, provides arguments for the decline and fall scenario. However, both Heeren and Roymans argue that the perspectives of decline and transformation need not exclude each other; they refer to processes that happened at the same time and were also in the same hands. The *foederati* received gold payments and drained resources from the central government, and frequently turned against the Roman government. At the same time, they represented Rome, fought in the name of the emperor, and settled in former provinces, connected to sites previously used by the provincial population. Heather too makes some important observations on this subject. He argues that the political unification of the Franks, different to for instance the Goths and Alamanni, was a post-Roman creation, an effect, rather than a cause of the West-Roman imperial collapse.[26] Furthermore, he warns us not to write off the imperial centre ability to control its northwest frontier too early in the 5th century. Until the mid-5th century the central imperial authorities "remained the most powerful shark swimming in the West European waters, able to inflict damaging defeats on barbarians."[27] We conclude that both decline and transformation were historical realities. They represent two sides of the same medallion and we propose that the perspectives should not be used as a binary opposition.

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[26] Heather, this volume, 35.

[27] Heather, this volume, 32.

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