

# Romano-Frankish interaction in the Lower Rhine frontier zone from the late 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> century – Some key archaeological trends explored

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The fall of the Western Roman Empire and its causes are among the most heavily debated topics in European history and archaeology. The negative view of decline and fall, inspired by the title of Edward Gibbon's seminal work "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" (1776–1788), prevailed during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, but by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century more nuanced interpretations of the Late Roman period began to appear. Many scholars employing the term Late Antiquity see the period from the late 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> century in Western Europe as one of transformation from the Roman to the Carolingian empire and describe the various changes in neutral terms rather than the pejorative vocabulary of decline<sup>2</sup>.

Probably the most important of all aspects of the end of the Western Roman Empire is the role played by 'barbarians', meaning non-Romans from outside the empire. In general, there are currently two prevailing views on this issue: firstly, one that stresses a great degree of relatively peaceful accommodation of barbarian groups by Rome, following initial violent interventions<sup>3</sup>; and a second view which stresses a more destructive role and settlement by conquest, ratified by western imperial authorities after the territories had already been invaded and de facto lost. Scholars like Peter Heather, Bryan Ward-Perkins, and Jean-Michel Carrié consider external barbarian violence as the prime force behind the fall of the Roman West and they criticise the theory that the empire "was quietly 'transformed' by the peaceful 'accommodation' into it of some Germanic barbarians"<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> For a historiographic overview, see HALSALL 2007, 19–22, and more recently CARRIÉ 2014.

<sup>3</sup> GOFFART 1980; HALSALL 2014.

<sup>4</sup> WARD-PERKINS / HEATHER 2005 (blog) cited by CARRIÉ 2014, 195; WARD-PERKINS 2005; HEATHER 2005.



Fig. 1. The province of *Germania secunda* and neighbouring areas in the Lower Rhine frontier zone in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

Northern Gaul and the Lower Rhine frontier area provide evidence to advance these discussions. The region has a solid tradition of archaeological research and has yielded a considerable amount of well-excavated and published fieldwork. While the degree of archaeological visibility and preservation differs according to region, the quality ranges from adequate to excellent. Because the region experienced widespread depopulation in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, we are able to conduct a very effective study of immigration in the late 4<sup>th</sup> / early 5<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, collaboration between professional archaeologists and private metal detector hobbyists has resulted in the discovery, investigation and publication of significant Late Roman gold hoards and other items of interest<sup>5</sup>. The Lower Rhine frontier zone is therefore an interesting ‘laboratory region’ that can sharpen our picture of the complex Romano-barbarian interaction.

<sup>5</sup> ROYMANS / HEEREN 2015; 2017. See also below. – Metal detection has been legal in the Netherlands under certain conditions since 2016. Detectorists are obliged to ask permission from the landowner and to report their finds. They are allowed to keep

the objects in private possession, but in case of hoards they have to share the financial value with the landowner. Metal finds by private individuals are published online: <https://www.portable-antiquities.nl>.

The aim of this paper is to present a regional case study in which we focus on some key aspects of this discussion and explore the potential of new evidence and methodologies. Our study area (*Fig. 1*) roughly corresponds to the northern half of the province of *Germania inferior*, later called *Germania secunda*, and the adjacent areas east and north of the Lower Rhine. We will discuss four interrelated topics: 1. the substantial depopulation of the countryside in the northern half of *Germania secunda* in the later 3<sup>rd</sup> century, 2. the nature of the Lower Rhine *limes* in the later 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, 3. the influx of new immigrant groups after the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, and 4. the draining of Roman gold to the Lower Rhine frontier in the late 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. We will discuss the available archaeological evidence and interpret it against the background of the historical information. We will end with some concluding remarks and prospects for further research. Most of the primary data for this study were gathered in a joint research programme (2012–2016) carried out by *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam* and Ghent University<sup>6</sup>.

The Late Roman frontier dynamics in the Lower Rhine region are closely linked to the appearance of the Franks. ‘Franks’ is a Roman collective label for a series of smaller tribes in the areas east and north of the Lower Rhine who had long maintained relations with the Roman Empire. However, it wasn’t until the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century that they were given this name by the Roman authorities. The ethnonym ‘Franks’ was subject to change in the course of time, with the 3<sup>rd</sup>-century meaning differing considerably from that of the 5<sup>th</sup> century<sup>7</sup>. We will argue below that Frankish groups underwent a serious social transformation during the Late Roman period and that this was closely tied to increasing interaction – both friendly and hostile – with the Roman Empire. Viewed from this perspective, the Franks can be regarded as a ‘product’ of the complex dynamics in the Late Roman frontier<sup>8</sup>.

#### Depopulation in the northern half of *Germania inferior* (later 3<sup>rd</sup> century)

From the late 1st to the 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, the area south and west of the Lower Rhine belonged to the Roman province of *Germania inferior*. The province most likely had six civitates: the *Agrippinensis* around Cologne, the *Traianensis* with its capital of Xanten, the *Tungri* with Tongres as its centre, the *Batavi* around Nijmegen, the *Cananefates* with a capital at Voorburg near modern-day The Hague, and the *Frisiavones* in the coastal area of Zeeland<sup>9</sup>. Apart from official towns and secondary centres, the settlements in the countryside of this Roman province are especially well researched. Villas, usually comprising several stone buildings, form the majority of rural settlements in the fertile loess areas in the south of the province, while non-villa settlements with native-style wooden byre-houses are the norm in the northern zone, which consists mainly of sandy soils and riverine clay soils<sup>10</sup>. In this northern zone many of the rural settlements have a common occupation history involving foundation around the start of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, a peak in the late 1st or early 2nd century, and gradual decline in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century (*Fig. 2*)<sup>11</sup>. Evidence of occupation in the subsequent early and middle part of the 4<sup>th</sup> century is very scarce, although some sites were reoccupied in the very late 4<sup>th</sup> or early 5<sup>th</sup> century (see below section “The influx of new immigrant groups”). This sequence, which was similar for many settlements, is based primarily on dendrochronological dates for well constructions, and secondly on

<sup>6</sup> See HEEREN 2016 and the various contributions to ROYMANS et al. 2017.

<sup>7</sup> DE BOONE 1954; ZÖLLNER 1970; TAAYKE 2003.

<sup>8</sup> On the study of Roman frontiers, see WHITTAKER 1994 and BREEZE 2018.

<sup>9</sup> BOGAERS 1972; RAEPSAET-CHARLIER 2002/2003.

<sup>10</sup> ROYMANS 1996; VOS 2009; HEEREN 2009; HABERMEHL 2013; ROYMANS et al. 2015.

<sup>11</sup> HEEREN 2009, 49–74; 2015, 281–287; VOS 2009, 89–99; DE BRUIN 2019, 213–219.

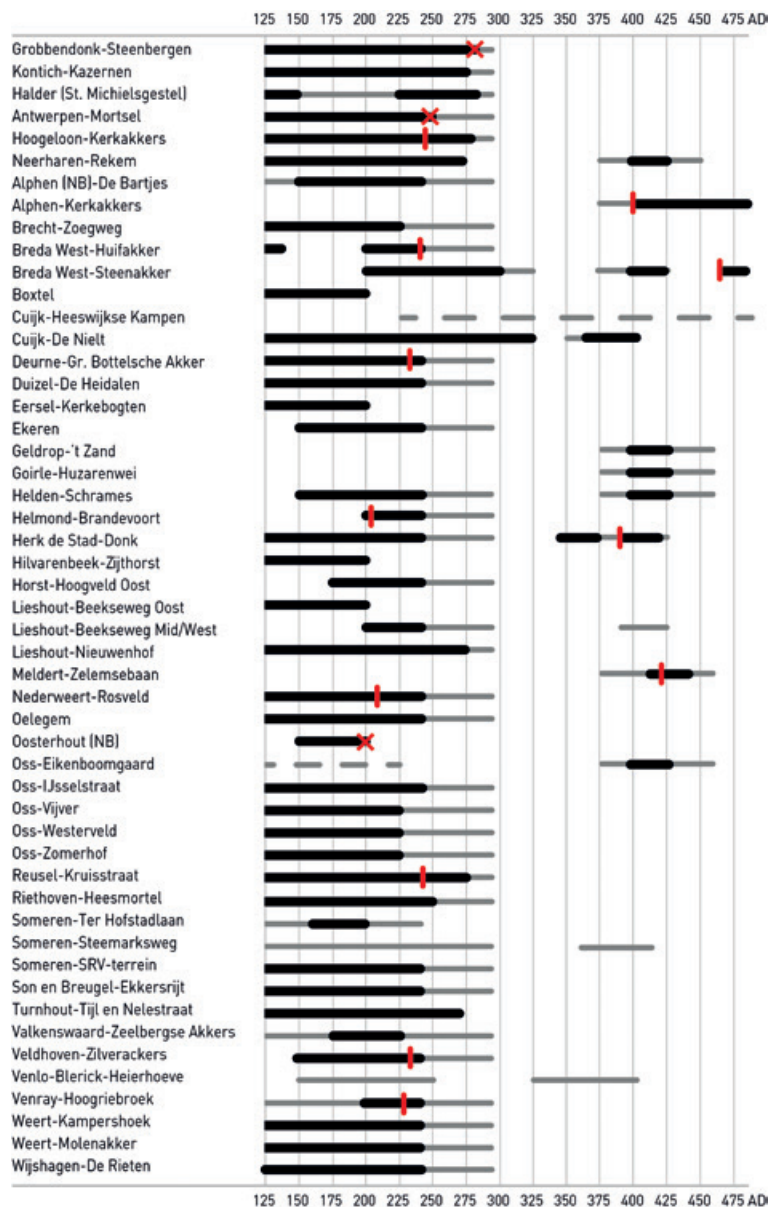


Fig. 2. Diagram of habitation trajectories of excavated rural settlements in the Meuse-Demer-Scheldt region in the later Roman period, showing an almost complete depopulation in the later 3<sup>rd</sup> century and partial resettlement in the late 4<sup>th</sup> / early 5<sup>th</sup> century. – Thick horizontal line: habitation period with good evidence; thin horizontal line: dating evidence uncertain; red cross: supposed fire catastrophe; vertical red line: dendrochronological date of well.

mobile finds (e. g. coins, brooches, and pottery) from the settlements and their cemeteries. Radiocarbon dates are rare and are generally not sufficiently precise. The dendrochronological dates available for the area show building activity into the AD 240s and perhaps the 250s, followed, as noted, by new foundations in around 400<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> HEEREN 2015; additions in HEEREN 2017, tab. 1.



Archaeologists usually argue that *absence of evidence* is not the same as *evidence of absence*. There are, however, additional arguments to support the view that in the Dutch river area and the Dutch-Belgian Meuse-Demer-Scheldt area, rural habitation had largely disappeared in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. As well as a lack of dendrochronological dates or *mobilia* for the early and middle part of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, built structures are also absent from that period, whereas later ones are present. House plans dated to c. AD 400 can be traced in several settlements (see below section “The influx of new immigrant groups”), but these lack obvious features belonging to the intermediate period<sup>13</sup>. This contrasts with sites north of the Rhine, where dendrochronology has identified early and mid-4<sup>th</sup>-century activity and where plentiful house plans and *mobilia* have been found<sup>14</sup>.

The large-scale rural depopulation as described for the Dutch river and Meuse-Demer-Scheldt areas, which were essentially non-villa landscapes, is less complete for the villa landscapes in the Cologne hinterland and the Belgian Hesbaye region. Several survey studies of the number of active sites in the Cologne hinterland are available, yielding data that are to some extent quantifiable. Of older date but still useful is the study by Gechter and Kunow<sup>15</sup>, who used pottery from fieldwalking campaigns and excavations as an approximation of the habitation history of several subregions. Thus the Kevelaerer Donkenland and Kempener Lehmplatte, located north of the road from Tongres to Cologne, show declining site numbers from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and a complete absence of sites in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Regions south of the road, such as the Cologne-Bonner Niederterrasse, Rheinbacher Lössplatte, and Hürtgener Hochfläche, show survival rates (the number of 4<sup>th</sup>-century villas compared to early 3<sup>rd</sup>-century ones) of 71 %, 52 %, and 30 % respectively. For the Aldenhovener Platte, Lenz argues that the decline had already begun about the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, but this was followed by a gradual rise in the number of sites in the late 3<sup>rd</sup>, early 4<sup>th</sup>, and later 4<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>16</sup>. The number of early 4<sup>th</sup>-century villas (21) is for 56 % of that of early 3<sup>rd</sup>-century sites.

Concluding our discussion of the countryside, we see large-scale depopulation in the north of the province. There are regional differences: in the Cananefatian area and the north of the Tungrian area (between the rivers Meuse, Demer, and Scheldt; *Figs 1–2*), depopulation seems to have been near complete. In the Batavian and Traianensian area, this is less certain. Built structures dating to the early and middle part of the 4<sup>th</sup> century have not been documented so far, but the presence there of 4<sup>th</sup>-century coins and crossbow brooches does indicate some activity. It is important to note that the depopulation thesis is based on a large number of excavated settlements, which provide the best quality information. The uncertainties come from the less well studied areas.

We should be aware that the depopulation of the countryside was paralleled by a serious urban decline or even collapse in our study region. The *civitas* centres of Voorburg (*Forum Hadriani*) and Nijmegen-Waterkwartier (*Ulpia Noviomagus*) were abandoned more or less completely in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century. A new military fortification was erected at Nijmegen-Valkhof<sup>17</sup>, a site recently identified as *Castra Herculis*, one of the forts said to have been restored by Julian II in 358<sup>18</sup>. At Xanten and Tongres new defensive circuits were set around a much reduced core<sup>19</sup>. Since Xanten was probably now called *Tricensimae*, a

<sup>13</sup> BERKVENs / TAAYKE 2004; HEEREN 2017, 155–159.

<sup>14</sup> Large settlements, for instance VAN Es 1967; TAAYKE et al. 2012. – Dendrochronology: ERDRICH 1998 cites several examples.

<sup>15</sup> GECHTER / KUNOW 1986.

<sup>16</sup> LENZ 1999.

<sup>17</sup> DE JONGE et al. 2006; VAN ENCKEVORT / THIJSSSEN 2002; WILLEMS et al. 2009.

<sup>18</sup> VERHAGEN / HEEREN 2016.

<sup>19</sup> OTTEN / RISTOW 2008; VANDERHOEVEN 2017.

reference to the 30<sup>th</sup> legion, and the surrounding countryside appears to have been empty, it seems likely that Xanten had lost its function as a *civitas* capital and now served as a military base<sup>20</sup>.

The causes of the depopulations are unclear. Warfare, barbarian incursions, and the Plague of Cyprian are mentioned in the written sources for this period (see the section below), while modern authors have proposed soil degradation<sup>21</sup>. However, these factors could never account for the swift and near total depopulation of large regions. While they may have caused population decline and partial depopulation, forced abandonment would explain the sheer scale of the phenomenon in some areas and it better fits the evidence. An interesting hypothesis is that we are dealing here with the forced deportation of groups to interior Gaul by the Roman authorities<sup>22</sup>. Late Roman panegyrics mention two cases of deportations of Frankish groups from the northern *civitates* in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century by respectively Maximian Augustus and Constantius Chlorus<sup>23</sup>. These Franks had settled shortly before in Batavia, where they were commanded by a leader from that area, possibly Postumus<sup>24</sup>. Interestingly, there is another source in which secessionist emperor Postumus and his successor Victorinus are said to have commanded ‘Celts and Franks’ as auxiliary troops<sup>25</sup>. Local indigenous groups (Batavians?) may have made common cause with the Frankish newcomers and consequently received the same punishment from the Roman authorities after the defeat of the secessionist ‘Gallic’ empire, namely deportation as *laeti* to interior Gaul. Their destination may well have been the Picardie in Northern France, since *Praefecti laetorum Batavorum*, interpreted as recruiting officers of Batavian *laeti* are attested at Arras and Noyon<sup>26</sup>.

#### No Limesfall on the Lower Rhine in the later 3<sup>rd</sup> century?

Among German archaeologists in particular, the end of Roman military installations along the borders of the northern provinces in the third quarter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century is regarded as one of the pillars of archaeological chronology<sup>27</sup>. The theory of *Limesfall* was first established for the Obergermanisch-Raetische *limes* and was based on three key elements:

1. the *limes* forts were attacked and overrun by Germanic peoples;
2. the events were dated to the years AD 259/260 because of the lack of coins struck after that period; and
3. the forts and hinterland were deserted for ever after. In addition to coins, the main evidence came from destruction layers at the intensively researched fort of Niederbieber. Published in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this theory is still widely accepted<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> OTTEN / RISTOW 2008.

<sup>21</sup> GROENMAN-VAN WAATERINGE 1980.

<sup>22</sup> HEEREN 2015, 290–294.

<sup>23</sup> Paneg. 8,21 (Constantio Caesari); Paneg. 6,5,3 (Constantino Augusto). – Cf. DE BOONE 1954, 57–58.

<sup>24</sup> Paneg. 6,5,3 (Constantino Augusto). – LENDERING / HUNINK 2018, 60. – The Franks were led by a former native of the place (Latin: *quondam alumnus*), probably of Roman provincial origin. NIXON / RODGERS [= Paneg.] suggest that reference is made

here to Carausius the Menapian, however both W. J. DE BOONE (1954, 36; 42; 58) and Willem WILLEMS (1986, 249) strongly argue that he should be identified as Postumus. Identified as Menapian, Carausius cannot easily be named an *alumnus* of the Franks.

<sup>25</sup> Hist. Aug. 6,2: *tyranni triginta*.

<sup>26</sup> Not. dign. occ. XLII, 217.

<sup>27</sup> SCHALLMAYER 1987.

<sup>28</sup> HOFFMANN 1823; RITTERLING 1901; cf. HEEREN 2016.

A similar *Limesfall*, with a slightly different chronology, was postulated from the 1980s onwards for the Lower Rhine area<sup>29</sup>. Coin series in this area usually break off around AD 270 or 275. However, destruction layers like the one at Niederbieber on the Obergermanisch-Raetische *limes* are absent along the Lower Rhine. Past published evidence of destruction cannot withstand a critical re-evaluation: destruction is often *assumed* in the case of the presence of a coin hoard, interpreted as a *Versteckhort*, or as ending coin lists.

Coin dates are a recurring element in these interpretations. All too often the end of a coin list was simply interpreted as the end of habitation at a site. Yet the supply of fresh coin was unstable: the ‘soldier-emperors’ of the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century, for instance, reigned only very briefly or were mainly in the field, and therefore struck limited quantities of coin. Although the last soldier-emperors and Tetrarchs did strike larger numbers of coins in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century, these were distributed in the East and barely reached the north-west provinces; in fact, older coins continued to circulate in these frontier zones during this period. Thus an absence of certain coins doesn’t automatically mean the cessation of coin circulation and therefore doesn’t need to imply site abandonment<sup>30</sup>.

Added to that, many ceramic and brooch types were previously dated with reference to the assumed *Limesfall*. The literature on the dating of material culture is littered with the end date of AD 260 or 270/275, all because of the coin-based assumption that sites terminated around this time. If we abandon the basic assumption of stable coin supply and combine the lack of burnt layers with the knowledge that old coinage would have filled the gap left by an interrupted, failed or minimal supply, we can conclude that the theory of *Limesfall* is less well-substantiated, at least for the Lower Rhine *limes*. The material culture of the so-called Niederbieber horizon needs to be re-dated to include the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century<sup>31</sup>.

Coins were again struck in large numbers by the government of Constantine I and distributed widely. Coin issues of his reign are very numerous at sites showing ample activity in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century, such as Tongres<sup>32</sup> and the Nijmegen-Valkhof area<sup>33</sup>; also numerous are issues from the subsequent Valentinianic period. In this period of ubiquitous coinage, the absence of coins at a site is indeed significant, and discontinuous use must be considered a serious option.

However, rejection of the *Limesfall* theory doesn’t mean that the Lower Rhine *limes*, with its line of forts, continued to function unchanged. There is surprisingly little evidence dating to the early and middle part of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Based on coins and crossbow brooches, there was some activity at a small number of forts in the present-day Netherlands. In Germany, starting at Xanten and moving south, we see a rise in the number of castella with proven 4<sup>th</sup>-century activity. For the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, the number of archaeological finds at *limes* sites increases once again along all parts of the Lower Rhine, with brooches, hairpins, and belt components from the period around AD 400 being relatively common. The nature of this later activity is unclear. The castella may have been manned by proper garrisons, but it is also possible that local groups used the former military forts in different ways.

But how does this archaeological picture of the Lower Rhine *limes* relate to the information we have from historical sources? The military history of the late 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries can best be characterised as a fitful period in which times of strength, when Roman military influence was restored in the Lower Rhine region, alternated with times of weakness

<sup>29</sup> See various contributions in HORN 1987 and BECHERT / WILLEMS 1995.

<sup>30</sup> STRIBRNY 1989; KROPFF / VAN DER VIN 2003.

<sup>31</sup> HEEREN 2016, 197–203.

<sup>32</sup> VANDERHOEVEN 2017.

<sup>33</sup> STEURES 2012.

or even the collapse of the *limes*<sup>34</sup>. As a rule, a reduction in the military occupation of the *limes* led directly to incursions and pillaging by Frankish war bands, while periods of recovery were linked to successful campaigns against Frankish groups by Postumus (c. 260), Probus (c. 275), Constantius (c. 290), Constantine I (c. 310), and Julian II (c. 358)<sup>35</sup>. These campaigns sought not only to ensure the security of the Gallic hinterland, but also to keep the strategic Rhine corridor open to allow grain shipments from Britannia (see below).

We may conclude with certainty that there was no definitive *Limesfall* in the Lower Rhine area in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century. The notion of the *limes* as a series of forts along the Rhine was alive and well throughout the 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>36</sup>. However, archaeology shows that the former Rhine *limes* was never fully restored and we should assume brief periods of collapse. Barbarian pressure on the *limes* has proved to be a phenomenon of all periods, and is linked to the martial ideology and practices of Frankish groups for whom taking part in raids was considered a normal stage in the cosmologically embedded life-cycle of male individuals<sup>37</sup>.

How this picture of a fitful functioning of the *limes* in the 4<sup>th</sup> century exactly relates to the described dramatic population decline and collapse of the civil infrastructure in the northern half of *Germania secunda*, still remains unclear. It is evident, however, that the large-scale abandonment of productive agricultural land must have made the Roman military along the Rhine highly dependent on grain imports from other provinces for its food supply. In this context we should probably understand the historical reports of British grain shipments to the Rhine area in the Late Roman period<sup>38</sup>.

#### The influx of new immigrant groups (late 4<sup>th</sup> / early 5<sup>th</sup> century)

Returning to the dendrochronological dates of well constructions in the southern Netherlands (note 12 and *Fig. 2*), we will now focus on the new wells that appeared more than a century after the cessation of well construction in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. There are some *post quem* dates of AD 383 and 393; the first reliable *ad quem* dates are 401–403 (Alphen-Kerkakkers) and 402 (Gennep-Stamelberg).

For the Meuse-Demer-Scheldt region, attempts have been made to connect new immigration with a passage in Ammian Marcellinus in which emperor Julian II negotiated with the *Salii* about access to the area (AD 358). However, both the outcome of the talks (Julian II defeated the Salians and sent them away) and the date argue against such an early immigration<sup>39</sup>. In fact, the archaeological dates between 401 and 402 tie in perfectly with another passage in the written sources, where Claudianus states that *magister militum* Stilicho withdrew all the Rhine troops to northern Italy in the winter of 401/402 to defend Honorius, who was besieged by Goths in Milan and Ravenna<sup>40</sup>. It is quite possible that Stilicho regulated the access of allied groups to the area rather than allow uncontrolled immigration by whoever came after the Roman withdrawal.

<sup>34</sup> For an overview of the military history of the Lower Rhine region in the Late Roman period, see the excellent thesis of DE BOONE 1954. Cf. also VAN ES 1981, 47–54 (largely relying on DE BOONE 1954); ZÖLLNER 1970, 1–43; FISCHER 2020, 218–219; 262–273.

<sup>35</sup> DE BOONE 1954; LENDERING / HUNINK 2018, 32–33; 60; ZÖLLNER 1970; FISCHER 2020, 262–273. – Constantine III (c. 408) is the last Roman general who is credited with restoring the Rhine

border. Zos. hist. 6,3,3 reports that Constantine ‘let rule a total security along the Rhine, which has been neglected since the age of Julian’.

<sup>36</sup> Paneg. 6,11.

<sup>37</sup> BAZELMANS 1999, 3–9.

<sup>38</sup> HEEREN 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Amm. 17,8. – Cf. THEUWS 2008 for comments on the unfounded connection of immigrant settlements to this historical event.

<sup>40</sup> Claud. Goth. 419–429.



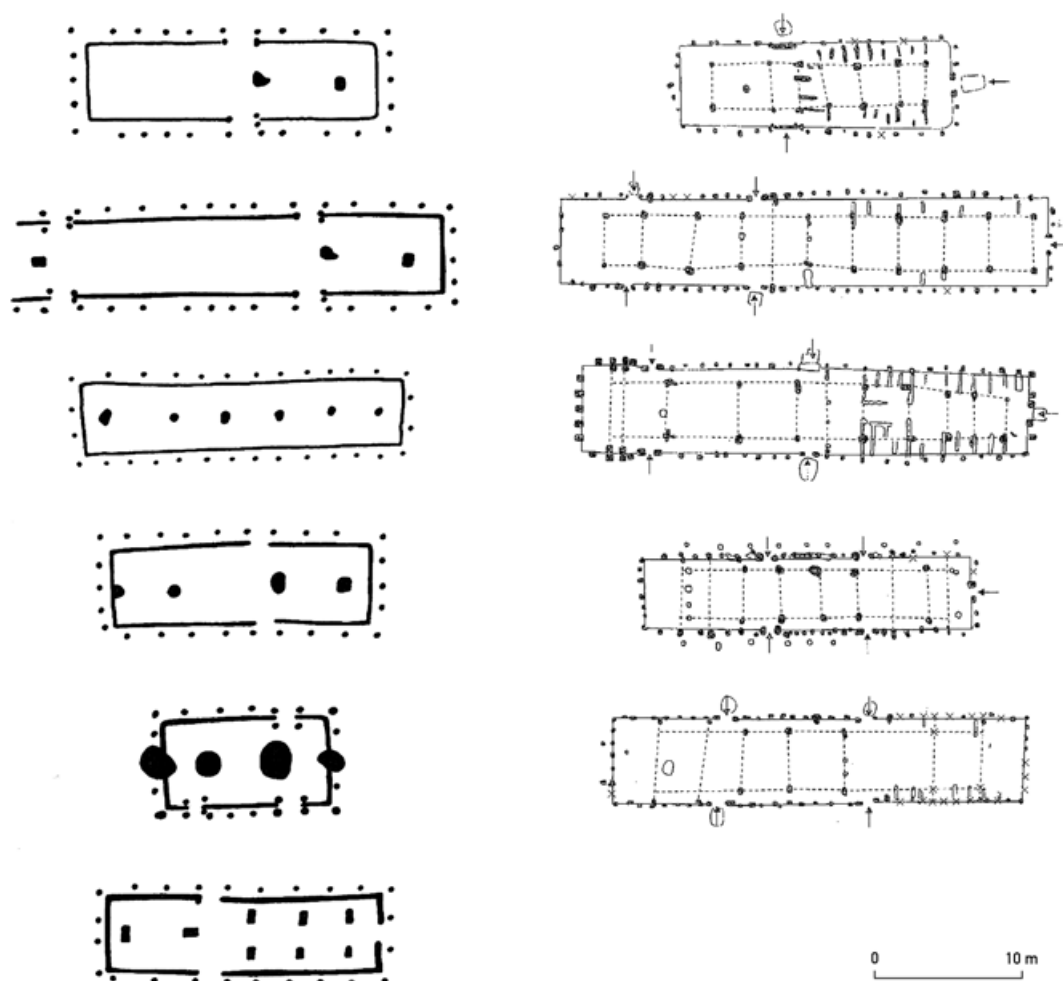


Fig. 3. The two-aisled building tradition of the Southern Netherlands from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (left) and the three-aisled building tradition of the Northern Netherlands from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> century (right).

Where did the immigrants come from? And can this question even be answered? In the German tradition of *ethnische Deutung*, certain weapons (*francisca* – Frankish axe) and metal dress accessories (such as tutulus brooches) would point to Germanic (Frankish or Saxon) settlers from the east bank of the Rhine<sup>41</sup>. However, several theory-oriented archaeologists, mainly in Anglophone literature, have argued that style change doesn't automatically mean a shift of peoples. Trade and even imitation could account for the presence of foreign objects or styles, with no true migration being involved. Furthermore, several of the objects deemed 'Germanic' were actually produced in the frontier zone as a result of close interaction, rather than imported from distant parts<sup>42</sup>. This process – in which new forms and practices arise through interaction – produces what has been called a 'mixed civilisation'<sup>43</sup>.

<sup>41</sup> For instance WERNER 1958; BÖHME 1974; BÖHME 1999.

<sup>42</sup> HALSALL 2000.

<sup>43</sup> WHITTAKER 1994, 222–237.



Fig. 4. The settlement of Breda-Steenakker with two-aisled farmsteads dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries to the west and a three-aisled farmhouse with several sunken huts to the northeast. Handmade pottery dates these features to the Late Roman period.

It is archaeologically impossible to make an ethnic distinction between ‘barbarians’ and ‘Romans’ on the basis of military dress and weapons alone. “The armies confronting one another in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, whether they fought for or against Rome, increasingly resembled one another as regards their varied composition and weaponry, which had become standardized through mutual borrowing”<sup>44</sup>.

While the above doubts are in themselves justified, we find more clues to the northern origin of the new settlers in the former Roman province. Apart from the *mobilia* (both the jewellery and pottery are of Rhine-Weser-Germanic style), clues are provided by the house plans and diet of the new settlers. As stated earlier, rural settlements both within and outside the Roman province consisted of wooden longhouses with a living area for people

<sup>44</sup> CARRIÉ 2014, 185.

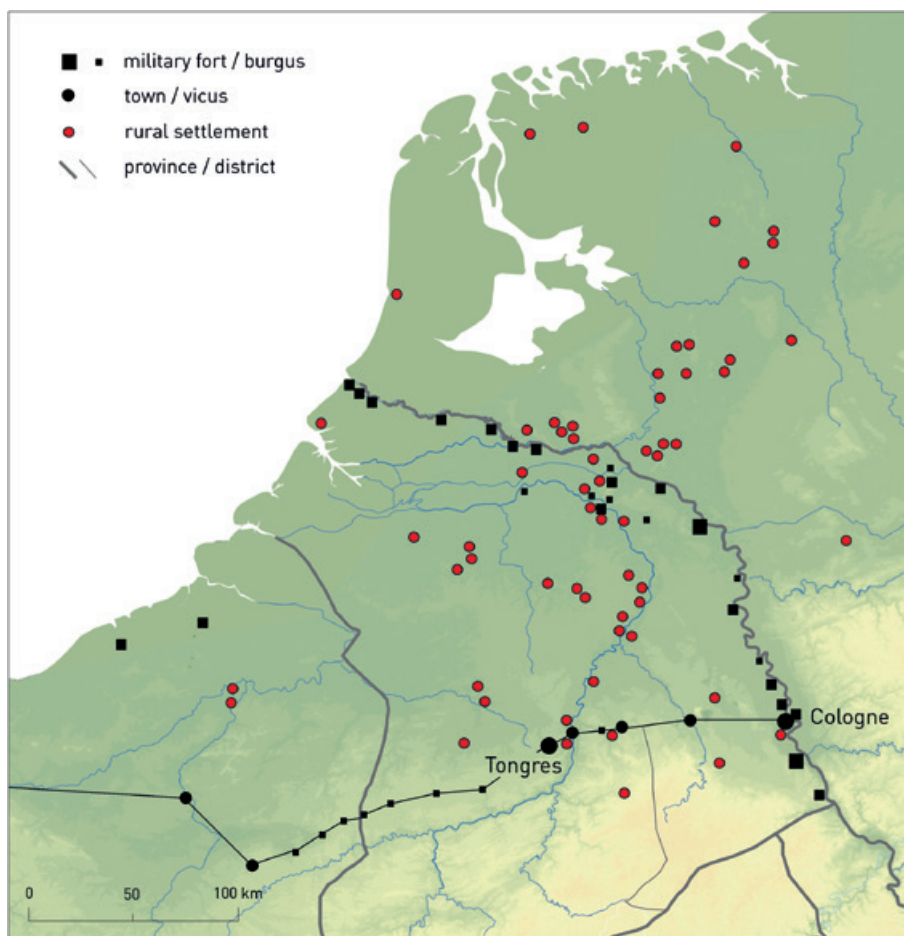


Fig. 5. Distribution of excavated Germanic-type settlements (red dots) with three-aisled farmhouses and sunken huts from the late 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> centuries in *Germania Secunda*.

and a byre-section for animals. North of the Rhine, these farmhouses had a three-aisled structure (Fig. 3, right)<sup>45</sup>. This was the case from prehistory throughout the Roman period until well into the Middle Ages. Sunken-featured outbuildings, wooden constructions with a lowered floor, were the norm here in the Roman and medieval periods. In the area south of the Meuse, the dominant building style from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries was a two-aisled structure, involving a single row of interior posts, for both farmhouses and outbuildings (Fig. 3, left)<sup>46</sup>. The same building style predominated in the Dutch Eastern river area, but some farmhouses also show a combination of a two-aisled part in the living quarters and a three-aisled part in the byre-section. In the newly emerging settlements south of the Rhine in around AD 400, three-aisled main buildings and sunken huts are well in evidence (Figs 4–5).

The well-known maxim ‘you are what you eat’ shows the close connection between foodways and identity. Rye has been found in considerable quantities in the immigrant settlements of the late 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. Before that time it was unknown as a culti-

<sup>45</sup> WATERBOLK 1999; 2009.

<sup>46</sup> SCHINKEL 1994.

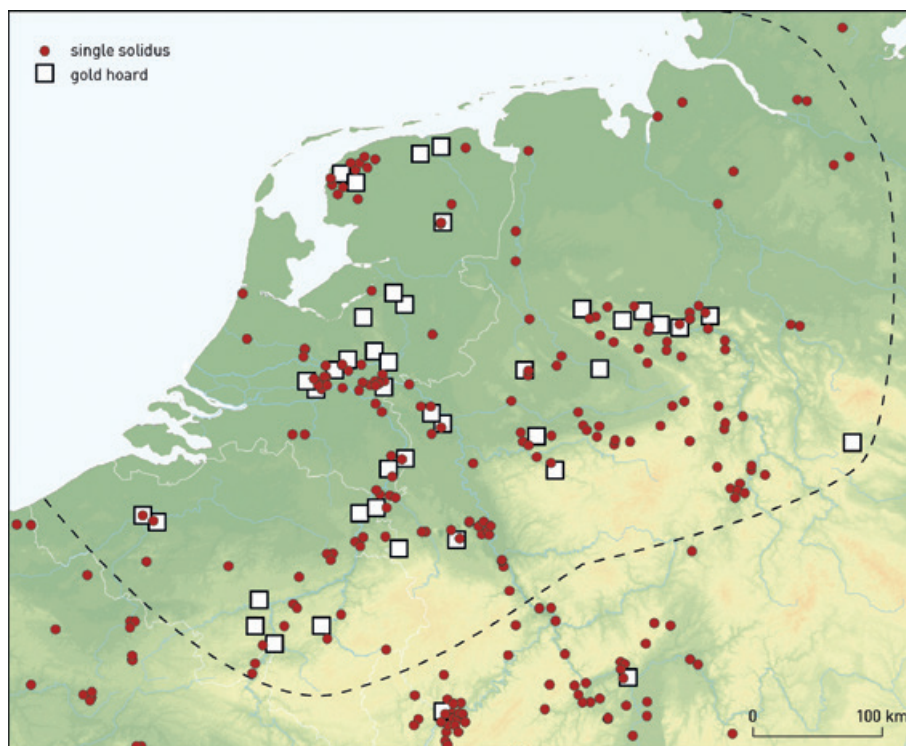


Fig. 6. General distribution of Late Roman gold finds (AD 364–460) in the Lower Rhine frontier zone between the Scheldt and Elbe.

vated plant in the area south of the Rhine. From the 1<sup>st</sup> century onwards, however, rye was an important part of the diet in the communities inhabiting the sandy soils north of the Rhine. This is an important clue to the northern origin of the settlers south of the Rhine<sup>47</sup>.

Helena Hamerow and Stefan Burmeister have warned against using house types as indicators of migration, since the house forms chosen as the main residence in immigration areas may change rapidly as a result of social interaction with other groups, as happened for instance in Anglo-Saxon England and early-modern America<sup>48</sup>. House types were easily copied and are therefore not necessarily indicative of the original provenance of the inhabitants. The same holds true for pottery styles and decoration. However, pottery production techniques, the interior division of houses and the style of outbuildings are less directed by outward appearance and more by habitus<sup>49</sup>. Such ‘internal’ cultural practices belonged to the ‘private’ domain and remained relatively stable for a long period and are therefore more suitable for studying migration.

However, Hamerow and Burmeister’s examples concerned immigration in areas that were already inhabited. In our case study, the immigration area was severely depopulated in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, probably in the third quarter of that century, which means that the area had been almost completely uninhabited for over a century when the new immigration began in around AD 400. An obvious first point to make is that a new population in an almost entirely depopulated area was by definition made up of immigrants. A second point

<sup>47</sup> HIDDINK 1999, 157–162; HEEREN 2017, 163 (including table and references).

<sup>48</sup> HAMEROW 1999; BURMEISTER 2000.

<sup>49</sup> HAMEROW 1999; BURMEISTER 2000.

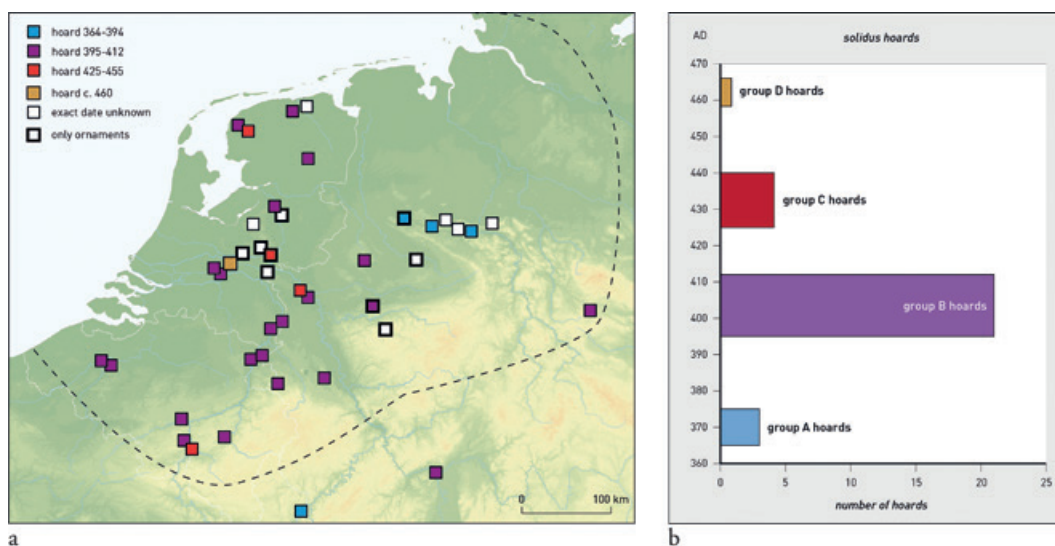


Fig. 7. Distribution of Late Roman gold hoards (a) and their chronology in the Lower Rhine frontier region and surroundings (b).

is that social interaction with autochthonous groups was minimal, which explains why the house types didn't change, as was the case in the examples mentioned above. Given the clues from mobile finds, house architecture and diet, it is highly likely that the immigrants came from the area north of the Rhine, probably from the Elbe-Weser triangle or the region of modern Drenthe and the Veluwe, where we find the best examples of the house plans of the immigrant settlements<sup>50</sup>.

Further support for the settlers' origins is provided by the political context of Roman payments to external allies, as shown by studying gold hoards in combination with the written sources. This is the subject of the next section.

#### Gold flows to the Lower Rhine frontier and the payment of foederati (late 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> century)

The Lower Rhine frontier zone of the late 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> centuries has yielded evidence of an exceptional influx of Roman gold in the form of solidi and ornaments that were probably made from melted-down solidi. This gold flow is a key dataset for analysing the nature and chronology of the Romano-Frankish interaction in the context of the Late Roman frontier, and it also allows us to make interesting comparisons with the historical evidence.

Of significance is firstly the general distribution pattern of the Roman gold finds (*Fig. 6*). This reveals an entirely open Rhine frontier, with dense concentrations of find spots on both the western and eastern sides of the Lower Rhine. Assuming that the total weight of the documented gold finds represents less than 1% of the original gold influx, we can make a rough estimate of the total volume of gold flow to the Lower Rhine frontier: this must have been several thousand kilos at least<sup>51</sup>.

The temporal patterning of the gold influx also prompts some interesting observations. Four phases can be distinguished, based on the dating of the hoard finds (*Fig. 7*). We see

<sup>50</sup> VAN ES 1967; HIDDINK 1999; WATERBOLK 2009; <sup>51</sup> ROYMANS 2017, 57. TAAYKE et al. 2012



a modest beginning in the third quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, followed by a clear peak in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century. The number then falls again in the second quarter of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, before disappearing after a final hoard in c. 460 AD. Another interesting development is the spatial distribution of hoards over time. The earliest hoards are concentrated in the area east of the Rhine. In the early 5<sup>th</sup> century they went on to cover the area both east and west of the Lower Rhine. Of interest is the entirely rural distribution pattern of the hoards in the province of *Germania secunda*; they are absent from contemporary urban centres like Cologne and Tongres, as well as from Roman military sites.

How should we interpret these patterns in social and historical terms? There is general agreement that gold circulation in Late Roman frontier regions was closely bound up with the military sphere as payment to soldiers and to leaders of federate war bands<sup>52</sup>. The Late Roman gold influx into the Lower Rhine region reflects payments by the Roman authorities or usurpers to Frankish allies (*foederati*) in exchange for military support. It is our hypothesis that the peak in the early 5<sup>th</sup>-century gold influx relates above all to Frankish groups switching their allegiance to the usurper Constantine III (407–411) in 407<sup>53</sup>. This marked the collapse of effective Roman state authority in the Lower Rhine region. There is indeed some historical evidence that Constantine III's power relied heavily on his alliances with Germanic groups, in particular the Franks<sup>54</sup>.

The study of changing gold flows can tell us about shifts in the power balance between the Western Roman Empire and Frankish groups. The practice of Roman authorities making substantial gold payments from the late 4<sup>th</sup> century onwards points to the free, federate status of Frankish groups. They make regular appearances in the historical sources as military allies and troop providers, and they succeeded in exploiting to maximum advantage the civil wars between the emperor and usurpers like Constantine III. The gold payments began in about 370 to groups who at that time were still living east of the Lower Rhine. In the early 5<sup>th</sup> century they also inhabited areas west of the Rhine, probably as a consequence of formal land allotments by Roman authorities during this phase.

This system of regular gold payments sparked a process of increasing complexity and social hierarchy within the Frankish groups. Frankish warlords became more powerful as their traditional tribal power base began to rely increasingly on external gold payments from the Romans, enabling them to reward their followers. Historical sources tell us that Frankish groups were already supplying troops to the Roman army in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> and early 4<sup>th</sup> centuries. This happened following their defeat by the Romans, when they had become subordinate peoples, or *laeti*. The power differences were still highly asymmetrical during this phase, as also evidenced in historical reports about the forced deportation of defeated Frankish groups to depopulated regions in interior Gaul<sup>55</sup>. The Roman authorities do not appear to have made gold payments to Frankish groups in this early phase. As mentioned above, payments seem to have only started in the third quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The weakening power of the Roman state meant the relative strengthening of that of Frankish groups, whose status in this phase shifted from subordinates or *laeti* into federates<sup>56</sup>.

A final question is how to explain the exceptional concentration of Late Roman gold in the Lower Rhine frontier zone compared with the relative rarity of gold finds in the southern provinces of Roman Gaul. Factors such as the impact of specific hoarding practices

<sup>52</sup> MARTIN 2009; ROYMANS 2017; FISCHER / LIND 2017; GUEST 2008.

<sup>53</sup> ROYMANS 2017.

<sup>54</sup> Zos. hist. 6,2,4; Greg. Tur. Franc. 2,9. – Cf. HOFFMANN 1995, 560; ROYMANS 2017, 68.

<sup>55</sup> See above note 23.

<sup>56</sup> DE BOONE 1954, 129.



Fig. 8. Distribution of solidi of Constantine III (407–411).

among Germanic groups may have played a role here. The most attractive explanation, however, relates to another aspect of the federate status of Frankish groups: their exemption from paying taxes. We find almost no gold hoards in southern Gallo-Roman regions, despite the fact that there too the solidus was the standard currency in all manner of transactions in the public and private spheres. One example is the distribution of *solidi* of Constantine III (Fig. 8); almost no gold coins of him are known outside the Lower Rhine frontier zone. There is a remarkable absence of hoards around Arles, where Constantine III had his residence for three years. This brings us to a methodological issue: the distribution map of solidus hoards and isolated solidi doesn't show a representative picture of the true circulation of these coins. In the Roman provinces the government was able to maintain its revenue by constantly creaming off the gold circulation through taxation. The exceptional density of gold finds in the Lower Rhine frontier zone indicates that, as *foederati*, the Frankish groups living there fell outside the Roman taxation cycle. Here the gold flowed in one direction only, and in principle was forever lost to the Roman treasury<sup>57</sup>.

<sup>57</sup> ROYMANS 2017, 75.

It is interesting to compare this flow of Roman gold to Germanic groups in the Lower Rhine frontier with precious metal flows to groups in other parts of “barbarian” Europe. Fraser Hunter and Kenneth Painter point to the different situation in northern Britain and Ireland where Roman *Hacksilber* dominates the picture<sup>58</sup>. It is difficult to explain this macro-regional patterning in precious metal flows to Late Roman frontiers. Hunter and Painter suggest that it may have been a matter of deliberate local choice; British groups may have preferred payment in silver above gold. More plausible, however, seems a link with the much more threatening power position of Frankish groups which enabled them to negotiate a special federate status with the Roman authorities in return for substantial gold payments and permission to settle on Roman land in *Germania secunda*<sup>59</sup>.

### Conclusion

While the different themes discussed above each generate interesting interpretations, it is only when viewed in conjunction that they produce a novel picture of the nature and dynamics of Romano-Frankish interaction. We can identify two stages in the process of decline and collapse of Roman state power and infrastructure in *Germania secunda*. The first clearly relates to the ‘3<sup>rd</sup>-century crisis’. The archaeological evidence shows that the depopulation of the countryside in the later 3<sup>rd</sup> century went hand in hand with urban decline, or even urban collapse, in the northern half of *Germania secunda*. This rural and urban collapse, rather than attacks by barbarian groups, may have been the reason for the military authorities to leave the Lower Rhine unguarded, for at least some decades. Although the situation stabilised in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century, the central government lacked the power and finances to fully restore the Rhine *limes*, and the countryside was not repopulated, nor was there a move towards local urban reform. The *civitates* of the *Batavi*, *Cananefates*, and *Frisiavones* were dispensed with once and for all as tax-paying administrative units, and the same is true of the northern half of the *civitas Tungrorum*.

The second stage covers the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, which saw the definitive collapse of the Roman administrative system in this area. The influx of Roman gold into the Lower Rhine region was clearly linked to the archaeologically documented settlement of Frankish immigrant groups. The gold payments to Frankish groups symbolise the weakened power of the Roman state, which had definitely lost its imperial monopoly on military violence at the frontier; they paid external groups to uphold the frontier. This case study also shows that the settlement of Frankish immigrant groups in the frontier zone was substantial and should not be underestimated.

In the coming years, new research will be able to corroborate and further hone the picture outlined above, primarily with regard to proof (rather than an assumption) of migration. A first pilot project started in 2018, based on material from some recently excavated Late Roman sites and burials in the Dutch river delta<sup>60</sup>. The focus – from an anthropological perspective – will be on investigating the farmsteads, burials, and material culture of first-generation Germanic settlers. A wide range of science-based methods is used, including strontium isotope studies of human remains. We expect inhumed individuals to show isotope values consistent with both the Holocene Dutch river delta and other landscape types, while the style of house plans and the provenance of the mobile material culture provide additional clues to their origins.

<sup>58</sup> HUNTER / PAINTER 2013; HUNTER / PAINTER 2017, 91–94.

<sup>59</sup> ROYMANS 2017, 74–76.

<sup>60</sup> Heeren, NWO-funded research 342-60-004.

Above all, this case study shows how interaction between the ‘Franks’ and the western Empire from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> centuries changed the ‘Franks’ and their roles and status, and in turn changed provincial Roman society. We argue for a model of an increasing power position of Frankish warlords, who used Roman gold and booty to consolidate and expand their war bands, thereby cutting across traditional tribal boundaries. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, successful Frankish warlords had settled in former Roman territory, where they sought to legitimise their renewed power position by assuming Roman offices. This finally resulted in them claiming both a barbarian and Roman identity, a phenomenon that is so strikingly expressed in the famous Childeric burial at Tournai. Even in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, however, the Franks did not yet form a tribal state or well-defined ethnic group, but should rather be seen as an external collective name for a number of Germanic groups in the Lower Rhine frontier zone<sup>61</sup>.

The view that the collapse of the Roman state in the northern frontier province was caused by the destructive power of Frankish invaders is too simplistic and therefore unsatisfactory. Other factors were also important, in particular civil war between the imperial government and the long series of usurpers in Gaul, who used external barbarian forces as their instrument of power. This latter practice implied a weakening of the Roman position in two ways: the independent agency of barbarian groups could lead to unexpected outcomes, and – since these forces required gold payments that subsequently remained outside the Roman taxation cycle – this imposed a heavy burden on the imperial treasury. The long-term history of the Franks shows that they were allies of Rome just as often as they were its opponents, and we know of several examples of Frankish leaders acting as Roman military commanders. A shortage of manpower and financial resources as a result of a long period – decades or even centuries – of endemic warfare led to the slow suffocation of the imperial system. Although there is now general agreement that many elements of the ‘ancient world’ survived the 5<sup>th</sup> century in the ‘successor states’, there is no doubt that the Western Empire definitively collapsed as a state system in 476, and that military pressure from Germanic groups was one of the key variables in that process. Thus both ‘decline and fall’ and ‘transformation of the ancient world’ are interesting perspectives in the debate and can be considered two sides of the same coin<sup>62</sup>. The Lower Rhine case study shows that archaeology can contribute to this debate by providing powerful regional bodies of evidence. In this respect, our optimism that we can make progress in a centuries-old debate is justified.

Finally, this case study shows that we have to address the issue of ‘barbarian’ movement and settlement of groups from *Germania magna* into the Empire in a nuanced way, allowing for both the more peaceful as well as the more destructive paradigms, depending on the groups involved. On the one hand we have the highly destructive mode of movement. Examples are the Rhine crossing of Vandals, Alans, and Sueves in 405–406 and their wanderings towards Brittany, Iberia, and Africa<sup>63</sup>. On the other hand there is the agreed movement and settlement of barbarian groups in alliance with official or usurper consent<sup>64</sup>. This ‘agreed relatively peaceful settlement as federates’ view would fit best with the short-distance move and settlement of Frankish groups to *Germania secunda* in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, where they were probably paid by Constantine III to help defend the Rhine frontier. However, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century we saw the usurper-supported immigration, followed

<sup>61</sup> THEUWS 2008, 766–767; ESMONDE CLEARY 2013, 376–386.

<sup>63</sup> KULIKOWSKI 2000.

<sup>64</sup> GOFFART 1980.

<sup>62</sup> ROYMANS / HEEREN 2017; HEEREN 2017.

by official rejection and deportation – presented as a reaction against violent incursion in the written sources. Therefore, the Lower Rhine area presents case studies of various ways and receptions of immigration in different periods<sup>65</sup>.

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<sup>65</sup> We owe thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers for highlighting this issue.



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**Abstract: Romano-Frankish interaction in the Lower Rhine frontier zone from the late 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> century – Some key archaeological trends explored**

This paper presents a case study on the development of the Lower Rhine region from the late 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. The focus is on the province of *Germania secunda* and the adjacent areas east and north of the Rhine with a special attention for the Romano-Frankish interaction. Four interrelated themes are discussed: 1. the widespread depopulation of the countryside in the northern half of *Germania secunda* in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century; 2. the question of the *Limesfall* in the same period; 3. the influx of new Frankish immigrant groups in the late 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> century, and 4. the draining of Roman gold to the Lower Rhine frontier in the same phase. On the basis of these developments we gain a better picture of the rise and transformation of Frankish groups. These groups underwent a process of increasing hierarchisation and militarisation during the Late Roman period and this process was closely tied to intense interaction – both friendly and hostile – with the Roman Empire. From this perspective, the Franks can be regarded as a ‘product’ of the Late Roman frontier.

**Zusammenfassung: Römisch-fränkische Interaktion im niederrheinischen Grenzgebiet vom späten 3. bis zum 5. Jahrhundert – Die Untersuchung einiger wichtiger archäologischer Trends**

Dieser Beitrag stellt eine Fallstudie zur Entwicklung des Niederrheingebiets vom späten 3. bis zum 5. Jahrhundert n. Chr. vor. Der Schwerpunkt liegt dabei auf der Provinz *Germania secunda* und den angrenzenden Gebieten östlich und nördlich des Rheins mit besonderem Augenmerk auf der römisch-fränkischen Interaktion. Es werden vier miteinander verknüpfte Themen behandelt: 1. die weitgehende Entvölkerung der Landschaft in der nördlichen Hälfte der *Germania secunda* im späten 3. Jahrhundert, 2. die Frage des Limesfalls im selben Zeitraum, 3. der Zustrom neuer fränkischer Einwanderergruppen im späten 4. und frühen 5. Jahrhundert und 4. die Abwanderung des römischen Goldes an die Niederrheingrenze in derselben Phase. Auf Grundlage dieser Entwicklungen gewinnen wir ein besseres Bild vom Aufstieg und Wandel der fränkischen Gruppen. Diese Gruppen durchliefen in der spätrömischen Zeit einen Prozess zunehmender Hierarchisierung und Militarisierung, der eng mit einer intensiven – sowohl freundlichen als auch feindlichen – Interaktion mit dem Römischen Reich verbunden war. Aus dieser Perspektive können die Franken als ein „Produkt“ der spätrömischen Grenze betrachtet werden.



**Résumé : Interactions entre Romains et Francs aux confins du Rhin inférieur de la fin du 3<sup>e</sup> au 5<sup>e</sup> siècle – Étude de quelques tendances archéologiques importantes**

Cette contribution présente une étude de cas portant sur l'évolution territoriale du Rhin inférieur de la fin du 3<sup>e</sup> au 5<sup>e</sup> siècle ap. J.-C. Elle met l'accent sur la province de *Germania secunda* et les territoires limitrophes à l'est et au nord du Rhin avec une attention particulière portée sur les interactions entre Romains et Francs. On traite ici quatre thèmes étroitement liés : 1. le dépeuplement avancé de la moitié nord de la *Germania secunda* à la fin du 3<sup>e</sup> siècle ; 2. la question de la chute du limes à la même époque ; 3. la pénétration d'immigrants francs à la fin du 4<sup>e</sup> et au début du 5<sup>e</sup> siècle ; 4. la fuite de l'or romain aux frontières du Rhin à la même époque. Ces différentes évolutions permettent d'obtenir une meilleure vue d'ensemble sur l'essor et la transformation des groupes francs. Ces groupes subissent au Bas-Empire un processus de hiérarchisation et de militarisation lié étroitement à d'intenses interactions – tant amicales qu'hostiles – avec l'Empire romain. Vu sous cet angle, on peut considérer que les Francs sont un « produit » de la frontière du Bas-Empire.

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References of figures:

*Fig. 1:* after HEEREN 2017, fig. 3. – *Fig. 2:* after HEEREN 2015, tab. 5, with additions. – *Fig. 3:* after SCHINKEL 1994, appendix (*left*); after WATERBOLK 1999, 108 fig. 1 (*right*). – *Fig. 4:* after BERKVEN / TAAYKE 2004, fig. 1. – *Fig. 5:* references for the settlements are available in HEEREN 2015; 2017; VAN ENCKEVORT et al. 2017. – *Fig. 6:* after ROYMANS 2017, fig. 1, with additions. – *Fig. 7:* after ROYMANS 2017, fig. 2, with some additions. – *Fig. 8:* based on data in CALLU / LORIOT 1990, with additions by the authors.