



LIVING AND DYING ON THE ROMAN FRONTIER AND BEYOND

HARRY **VAN ENCKEVORT**, MARK **DRIESSEN**, ERIK **GRAAFSTAL**,
TOM **HAZENBERG**, TATIANA **IVLEVA** AND CAROL **VAN DRIEL-MURRAY** (EDS)

LIMES XXV VOLUME 3



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Contents

Preface	11
PART 1: TALES OF GLORY. NARRATIVES OF ROMAN VICTORY	13
Narratives of Roman victory between Imperial propaganda and war crimes	15
Martina Meyr and Christof Flügel	
Das sogenannte Ubiermonument in Köln. Versuch einer Deutung	25
Tilmann Bechert	
Commemorating the dead in ancient Rome and modern Europe	31
David J. Breeze	
The Vynen monument and commemorating a greater victory. Flavian propaganda and reconstruction along the limes	39
Michael den Hartog	
Visions of victory in Roman <i>Dacia</i>	47
Monica Gui	
Mere propaganda? Victoria and Mars representations and inscriptions on the Upper German-Raetian Limes	55
Martin Kemkes	
Le programme iconographique peint de Deir el-Atrash. Contrôle romain, protection et présence militaire dans le désert Oriental	65
Julie Marchand and Joachim Le Bomin	
My face and the wolf song. A Roman facemask and a 'draco' from Carnuntum	75
Eva Steigberger	
Römische Staats- und Siegesdenkmäler in den Provinzen	81
Kai M. Töpfer	

PART 2: HOME AWAY FROM HOME. 89
ROMAN FRONTIERS AS MOVERS AND MIXERS OF PEOPLE

Evidence for child migration at *Vindolanda* on the northern 91
frontier of Roman Britain. An osteobiography of a clandestine burial

Trudi J. Buck

I am going on a trip, what am I going to pack? A comparative 97
approach to the pottery of Batavians at home and abroad

Cristina Crizbasan and Roderick C.A. Geerts

Mainz-*Mogontiacum*. Ein ethnischer Schmelzpunkt an der 107
Rheingrenze des *Imperium Romanum* im 1. Jahrhundert n. Chr.

Michael Johannes Klein

Soldiers, slaves, priests, administrative servants (?) 115
Persons with Greek/oriental names in Rhaetia

Julia Kopf

Challenges for *auxilia* veterans in going home 127

Jared H. Kreiner

***Ex toto Orbe Romano*. Ethnical diversity at the western frontier 133**
of Roman *Dacia*

Eduard Nemeth

PART 3: CHILDHOOD ON THE ROMAN FRONTIERS 139

Gendered futures. Children's lives remembered on 141
Rome's northern frontiers

Maureen Carroll

Vulnerable victims. 'Barbarian' captive children in 151
Roman Imperial conflict iconography

Kelsey Shawn Madden

Onomastics, children and identity on Roman military diplomas 157

Alexander Meyer and Elizabeth M. Greene

PART 4: EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE VICINITY OF THE FORTS 163

Introduction to the session 'The military *vicus*. 165
Everyday life in the vicinity of the forts'

Julia P. Chorus and Monica K. Dütting

In the hinterland of the Roman fortress at *Novae*. A new 171
contribution to the rural settlement pattern in *Moesia inferior*

Petya A. Andreeva

The prison in the fortress of *Apulum* (Alba Iulia) 179

George Cupcea

Leisure facilities in the Tingitanian frontier. The baths in 189
the roman *castellum* of *Tamuda* (Tetouan, Morocco)

José A. Expósito, Darío Bernal-Casasola and Tarik Moujoud

The integration of public baths into post-military <i>colonia</i> and <i>civitas</i> capitals in Roman Britain	199
Amanda A. Hardman	
From Caesar to Late Antiquity. Roman settlement in the vicinity of the Hermeskeil fortress	205
Sabine Hornung, Lars Blöck, Marvin Seferi, Patrick Mertl and Arno Braun	
<i>Spuma Batava</i>. Experimental research into a Germanic fad in 1st-century Rome	215
Hans DJ. Huisman and Dorothee M. Olthof	
One thing leads to another. Settlement development in the Stein-<i>Lauriacum</i>/Enns region (Austria)	223
Barbara Kainrath and Eva Thysell	
The Arnsburg <i>tumulus</i> and the imagined underworld. Bathing and hunting in the meadows of the river Wetter	231
Julia M. Koch	
From Imperial guardians to local patriots. The defenders of <i>Novae (Moesia inferior)</i> in Late Antiquity and their relationship to state, church and neighbourhood	241
Martin Lemke	
Game as cultural bridging. The case of the Batavians of <i>Vindolanda</i>	249
Alessandro Pace	
Alchester. Life in a fortress of the AD 40's	257
Eberhard W. Sauer	
How were milestone texts transmitted to the stonecutters?	267
Dé C. Steures	
The Birdoswald Extra-Mural Settlement Project	271
Tony Wilmott and Ian Haynes	
PART 5: CULT AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICES	279
Sub-Roman and post-Roman christianity on Hadrian's Wall. The remarkable new evidence from <i>Vindolanda</i>	281
Marta Alberti and Andrew Robin Birley	
Merkur, Vulkan, Neptun und Herkules. Die Götter der Arbeitswelt und ihre Verehrung im Vicus	289
Dorit C. Engster	
The marble bust of Mithraic tauroctony from <i>Olbia Pontica</i>	297
Roman Kozlenko	
Of pigs and gods. An altar to Jupiter Heliopolitanus from <i>Siscia (Sisak)</i> revisited	307
Ljubica Perinić and Anton Ye. Baryshnikov	

A puzzling votive inscription by a decurion of <i>Cohors I Belgarum</i>	313
Ivan Radman-Livaja	
<i>Principia</i> or monasteries? Two fortified basilicas in the North African frontier zone	319
Alan Rushworth	
Across Rome's southern frontier. The Meroitic cemetery at Faras in Sudanese Nubia	329
Henry C. Bishop-Wright	
Ein großes <i>Iararium</i>...oder ein kleiner Tempel. Ein privater Schrein im Nordvicus von Krefeld-Gellep	339
Eric Sponville	
PART 6: SPEAKING OF THE DEAD. FUNERARY CUSTOMS AND GRAVE GOODS	347
A group of unusual burials under the <i>CUT</i> by-pass, Xanten	349
Clive Bridger	
Relecture chronologique de la tombe des enfants du triérarque Domitianus à Boulogne-sur-Mer	357
Julie Flahaut, Olivier Blamangin, Alexia Morel, Angélique Demon, Christine Hoët-Van Cauwenberghe, Aurore Louis and Annick Thuet	
The rural burial landscape in the northern hinterland of Roman Nijmegen	367
Joep Hendriks	
Life and death at the Danube Limes. The cemeteries of <i>Lauriacum</i>/Enns (Austria)	379
Lisa Huber, Felix Lang, Maria Marschler, Andrea Stadlmayr and Stefan Traxler	
Challenging late antique chronology. Graves as continuity indicators along the Rhine frontier of <i>Germania prima</i>	387
Rebecca Nashan	
Buried with the dead. Grave goods from twelve Roman cemeteries in the Dutch eastern river area	393
W. Frederique Reigersman-van Lidth de Jeude	
Roman funerary archaeology in Slovenia. The known, the new, and the missing	403
Kaja Stemberger Flegar	
Deviant burials in late antique <i>Atuatuca Tungrorum</i> (Tongeren, Belgium)	411
Steven Vandewal	
Dying outside the gates. The Brooklyn House, Norton, Yorkshire, <i>bustum</i> burial and <i>busta</i> in Roman Britain	417
Pete Wilson	

PART 7: REVISITING ROMAN IMPORTS BEYOND THE FRONTIER. INVESTIGATING PROCESSES OF MOVEMENT	427
Roman-barbarian interaction. Revisiting Roman imports beyond the frontier; investigating processes of movement.	429
Introductory remarks	
Thomas Schierl, Fraser Hunter and Thomas Grane	
Luxury, resources, or both? Roman objects in Germanic settlements on the example of Ostwestfalen-Lippe	441
Hannes Buchmann	
Asking 'Why'. Seeking indigenous motivations behind the movement of Roman material into Ireland	451
Karen Murad	

Game as cultural bridging

The case of the Batavians of *Vindolanda*

Alessandro Pace

The latest research perspectives have demonstrated the great potential of game as an instrument of cultural investigation, given its capacity of penetrating and highlighting attitudes and mental schemes of any society. Game also fulfills the important function of being a social glue, not only inside a community but also outside of it, as it allows individuals of different provenance to overcome their intrinsic cultural barriers by creating new spaces for interaction (Dasen & Vespa 2020, 13-16).

This penchant for bringing people together is all the more evident during moments of tension and attrition. It is in these circumstances that *ludus* provides one of the few instances in which interpersonal relationships can be re-established. To use an example from current times, we can look at the Iraq War, where playing games has always represented one of the few opportunities in which American soldiers and local populations could come into contact with one another, notwithstanding the insurmountable linguistic and cultural barriers (Hall 2019, 201). Given these premises, this contribution aims to analyze the diffusion of games in the military garrisons around the limes. Our goal is to investigate the dynamics that developed as a consequence of the progressive incorporation into the Roman orbit of different ethnic groups, in that wide and articulated phenomenon usually called 'romanization' (Pitts 2015, 69-74; Pitts & Versluys 2015, 5-23). In the context of this complex dynamics of cultural cooptation, game can deploy all of its potential to trace the diffusion of new cultural models among the *peregrini* (individuals that did not have Roman citizenship), and consequently their progressive integration into the Roman world (Pace 2015; 2020; 2022). Game is not just a pastime but, as a regulated activity, it fulfilled the fundamental function of introducing people to a new lifestyle organized and disciplined by a precise series of shared binding norms, exactly as it happens in any ludic activity (Vespa 2020, 88-93).

To demonstrate the potential of game as an element of social integration we want to focus on a particular case study, namely the auxiliary troops (*auxilia*) stationed in *Vindolanda* (Chesterholm, Northumberland), in the province of *Britannia*. *Vindolanda* was a fundamental strategic hub in the northern defensive system of the province (fig. 1), a role that grew in importance after the campaigns in the Highlands led by Julius Agricola in the second half of the 1st century AD (Birley 2002, 49-56). It was during this time that the northern border of the province was established along the Stanegate road running between *Luguvalium* (Carlisle) and *Coria* (Corbridge).

We have chosen to focus on *Vindolanda* for two main reasons. First, the special conditions of the archaeological record have allowed the conservation of many objects made of perishable materials, among which the famous inscribed tablets. In addition,

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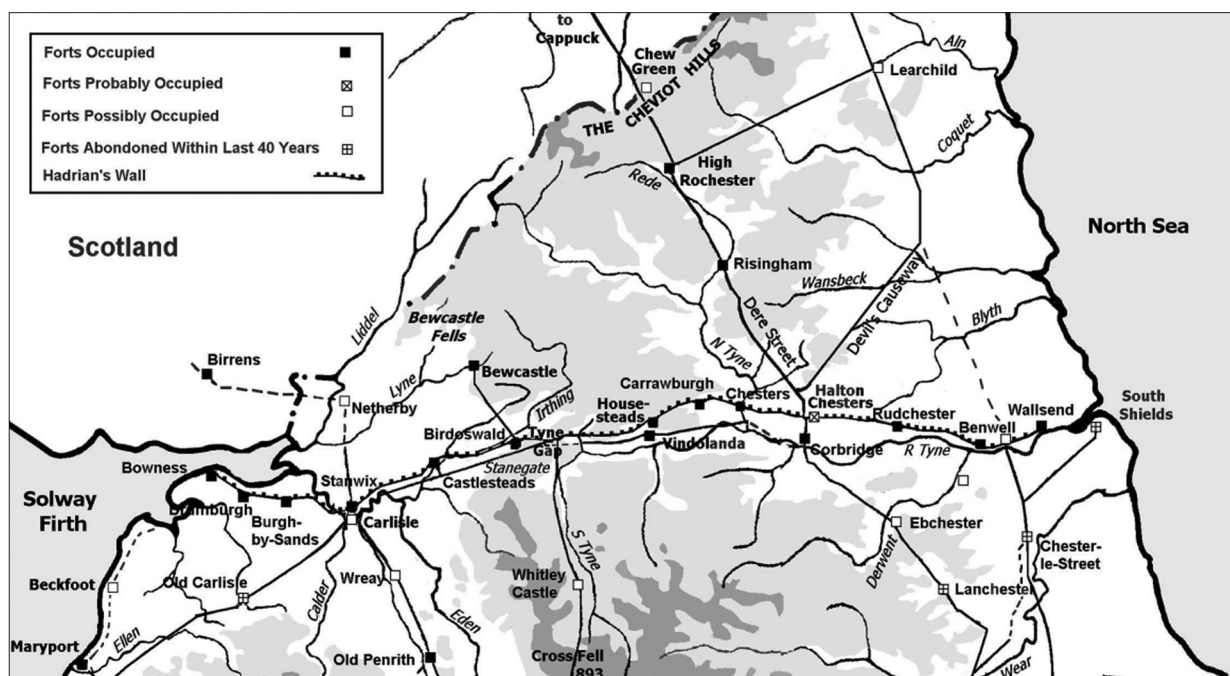


Figure 1. Map showing the forts and major road systems of Hadrian's Wall (after Breeze & Dobson 2000, 221, fig. 32).

the accurate methodology followed during the excavation and the prompt publication of the reports have also allowed scholars to divide the occupation phases of the site into fourteen precisely dated periods. Second, the data from *Vindolanda* allows us to focus our attention on the *Batavi*, a Germanic population settled in the Rhine delta that provided troops for one of the units of *auxilia* stationed there (fig. 2), *Cohors VIII Batavorum*, attested at *Vindolanda* between AD 90 and 105 (Russell *et al.* 2022, 174-175).

The Batavians are probably one of the better-studied populations (at least among those coming from northern Europe) among those that served in the ranks of the auxiliary troops of the Roman army (Roymans 2004; 2014; Derks 2009). These studies certify a fundamental aspect of our work, that is, that at the beginning of the 2nd century AD these populations were recruited essentially on an ethnic basis in an only partially Romanized context. The period between c. 90 and 105 is generally known as the 'Batavian phase' of *Vindolanda* (periods II and III), as *Cohors VIII Batavorum* was stationed there (Russell *et al.* 2022, 174-175). The importance of this unit for our study derives from a lucky convergence between archaeological data and a long tradition of studies regarding the motherland of the soldiers, both aspects that allow us to touch upon some relevant topics.

We want to highlight that at the beginning of the 2nd century the Batavian units were still supplied with fresh recruits on an ethnic basis. Other formations

of *auxilia*, while maintaining their original titles, had started to welcome among their ranks recruits from the region where they were stationed as early as the 1st century AD (Derks 2009, 243; Russell *et al.* 2022, 203). Several sources suggest the continuous influx of *tirones* from the land of the *Batavi*. First, onomastics: the inscribed tablets dating from the period in which *Cohors VIII Batavorum* was stationed at *Vindolanda* provide a plethora of names that suggest a provenance of these soldiers from the Rhine delta (Derks 2009, 252). Naturally, we cannot claim that the unit was exclusively composed of Batavians, but they were certainly the majority; consequently, we cannot doubt the ethnic homogeneity of this unit as a whole. Further proof of this is the fact that texts dating from period III (AD 100 to 105) mention some soldiers by their ethnic origin, like for instance Sabinus of the *Treviri* and Victor of the *Vangiones*, to somehow point out their different origins compared to the rest of the company (Birley 2002, 99; Derks 2009, 252).

According to some scholars, the presence of Greek names recorded on other tablets discovered in *Vindolanda* would be further proof of the presence of Batavians, since this fashion may have spread in their region from the soldiers who had served among the *Germani corporis custodes* during the Julio-Claudian dynasty (Speidel 1994, 12-29; Roymans 2004, 229). A direct connection with their motherland would also be proven by the letters exchanged between some soldiers



Figure 2. The area of the Rhine/Meuse delta (after Roymans 2004, 26, fig. 8.4).

stationed at *Vindolanda* and their families back home, if some of the tablets can indeed be interpreted this way (Birley 2002, 100; Derks & Roymans 2002, 100).

The markedly identity-based character of *Cohors VIII Batavorum* is the expression of a broader sense of belonging that characterized these people, an aspect on which scholars have long focused their attention. The very ethnogenesis of the Batavians might have been favored by the intervention of the Romans, always interested in finding solutions to manage the new frontier created after the Gallic campaigns of Julius Caesar (Roymans 2004, 55-64). Having experienced the warlike qualities of these people, Rome may have somehow favored the creation of a self-aware identity by recruiting Batavian regiments on an ethnic basis and deploying them to fight together in the same operational units. Four Batavian cohorts fought side by side in *Britannia* on the frontline of the battle of *Mons Graupius* (Tacitus *Agricola* 36). Some of them kept interacting with each other after the war, as proven by the fact that the Third Cohort of the Batavians was probably stationed in *Ulucium* (Newbrough), on the axis of the Stanegate, roughly 11 km east of *Vindolanda*, as suggested by a 'letter' found at *Vindolanda* and addressed to *Paridi Ulucio cas[tris coh]ortis III Batavorum* (Birley 2002, 38).

Another tool to maintain a strong communal spirit of these troops was the special command chain characterizing the Batavian units (Nouwen 1995, 130; Derks & Teitler 2018, 56). Based on a *vetus institutum* (Tacitus *Historiae* 4.13), from the very beginning each battalion was led, unlike other troops of *auxilia*, by local noblemen who in time were rewarded with Roman citizenship. In the Augustan period, the Batavians were led into battle by a certain Chariovalda (Tacitus *Annales* 2.11), but it was probably in the same years that a new Romanized aristocracy was born. This is demonstrated by the *nomina* of people like Iulius Civilis or Iulius Paulus, whose families may have obtained Roman citizenship between the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius. The revolt led by Iulius Civilis, widely discussed in the scholarship, led to a general reorganization of the Batavian auxiliary troops. According to some scholars, the old aristocratic families that had become compromised during the revolt were expelled. However, there is no data confirming that Flavius Genialis and Flavius Cerialis, the two commanders of *Cohors VIII Batavorum* stationed at *Vindolanda* after the revolt, belonged to a new social class that had emerged from the turmoil. Certainly, both men's *nomina* show a close relationship with the Flavian

dynasty, so it is more plausible that they were a sign of the loyalty of their families to the Roman cause. In the case of Flavius Cerialis, his *nomen* is directly linked to Petillius Cerialis, the commander who had quelled the revolt (Roymans 2004, 257).

A message from *decurio* Masclus, whose presence proves that *Cohors VIII Batavorum* was a *cohors milliaria equitata*, provides a suggestive insight into the relationships existing inside the unit. In a message to Flavius Cerialis asking for orders and beer for his soldiers, Masclus calls him 'rex' (TV III.628). Scholars have long debated the meaning of this salutation. We can exclude an interpretation of this term as a sign of formal deference, as the latter would be fit for a different diastratic context. This is also suggested by the spelling mistakes of Masclus (*habunt* instead of *habent*) who, judging by his single name, was probably not a Roman citizen. The word *rex* then is more probably employed by the *decurio* to deferentially refer to the fact that *praefectus* Flavius Cerialis belonged to Batavian nobility. *Rex* is not to be interpreted in a literal sense because from at least the first half of the 1st century AD the 'king' of the Batavians had been replaced by a *summus magistratus*. Masclus is then not making a distinction between the status of Flavius Cerialis as a commander and as a nobleman, two aspects that were not mutually exclusive and probably conferred more charisma and authority to his office (Cuff 2011, 154).

The very title of *praefectus* held by Flavius Cerialis underlines the special character of the Batavian troops. Since *Cohors VIII Batavorum* was *milliaria*, it should have been led by a *tribunus*, as *praefecti* would usually command the 500-strong *cohortes quingenariae*. The peculiarity in the command structure of these units might be a consequence of the *vetus institutus* that allowed members of the *stirps regia* of the Batavians to lead their troops. In the same message, *decurio* Masclus addresses his *rex* lamenting the fact that his men are short of beer. The consumption of this drink has attracted the interest of scholars who have seen in this fact a further expression of the identity of the Batavian soldiers. The preference expressed for beer as opposed to more 'Roman' wine or *posca* (watered wine) may be a continuation of the customs of the motherland, as the Lower Rhine region is a 'beer-drinking area' (Pitts 2015, 85). While this does not mean that the Batavians were completely resistant to new customs, as proven by the presence of wine amphorae in the fort, it is also true that the presence of a *cervesarius* (brewer) at *Vindolanda* alongside *Cohors VIII Batavorum* cannot be a coincidence (Birley 2002, 130).

To this immaterial aspect, we can add another one, more easily readable in the archaeological data. The appearance in the fort of a type of grey-clay pottery (*terra nigra*) belonging to a broader production usually called 'Gallo-Belgic ware' merging local and foreign traditions (especially *terra sigillata*) is closely related to the presence of Batavian troops (Pitts 2017, 47-49). The production centers of this

type of pottery are localized in the area of northern Gaul, part of which was in the province of *Germania inferior*. Notably, one of the cities situated in this territory was *Ulpia Noviomagus* (Nijmegen), known before AD 70 as *Oppidum Batavorum* or *Batavodurum*, the capital of the Batavians. What has drawn the attention of scholars is not the mere presence of this class of pottery in *Britannia*, which is a well-known and well-documented phenomenon, but rather the distribution pattern (or object-scapes) of these objects in *Vindolanda*. One of the shapes found more often on this site is the beaker, whose main production centers, traditionally still linked to pre-Roman pottery shapes, were active in the area between the rivers Meuse and Rhine. Gallo-Belgic products (especially those in *terra nigra*) are not usually widespread in military centers and large cities in the province of *Britannia* because they were perceived as too closely related to local productions. However, there are significant exceptions.

For instance, in the military fort of Usk (Wales), occupied by *Legio XX Valeria Victrix*, archaeologists have discovered numerous beakers in Gallo-Belgic Ware. This fact might be directly connected with the movement of these objects alongside the soldiers: *Legio XX* had moved there from its former camp in Neuss north of Köln, an area where the beaker was the preeminent shape (Pitts 2017, 53-56). The same explanation might also work for the *terra nigra* beakers found in *Vindolanda*, as they may have arrived in *Britannia* with the Batavians. If that is the case, this might also be a sign of a direct connection between the soldiers and their original region and customs, as this kind of drinking vessels could contain a larger volume of liquid compared to more genuinely Roman ones (especially shapes in Italic samian ware), and may then be regarded as beer mugs (Pitts 2015, 85).

The identity of the Batavians deployed in *Vindolanda* can be observed not only in the preference for a certain type of drink but also for a certain type of food. In fact, the text found on one tablet consists of a list of ingredients used to prepare a typical dish of the Batavian region (dressed with a garlic sauce), as suggested by the adjective '*batavico*', plausibly followed by the words '*more paratum*' (TV II.208). Another field in which we can glean identity markers is that of building techniques. Scholars have highlighted how the techniques and tools employed by soldiers in building the fort defenses can be read as an expression of identity. In the case of *Vindolanda*, recent excavations have highlighted the differences in the turf and timber fortifications during the phases that preceded the stone fort. In particular, in the fort built by *Cohors VIII Batavorum* (period III), we can recognize a different *modus operandi* compared to the earlier and following phases. The fortifications of periods I, II, and IV were built by *Cohors I Tungrorum*, while those in period V were probably the work of *Cohors II Nerviorum*. These differences might then point to the existence of

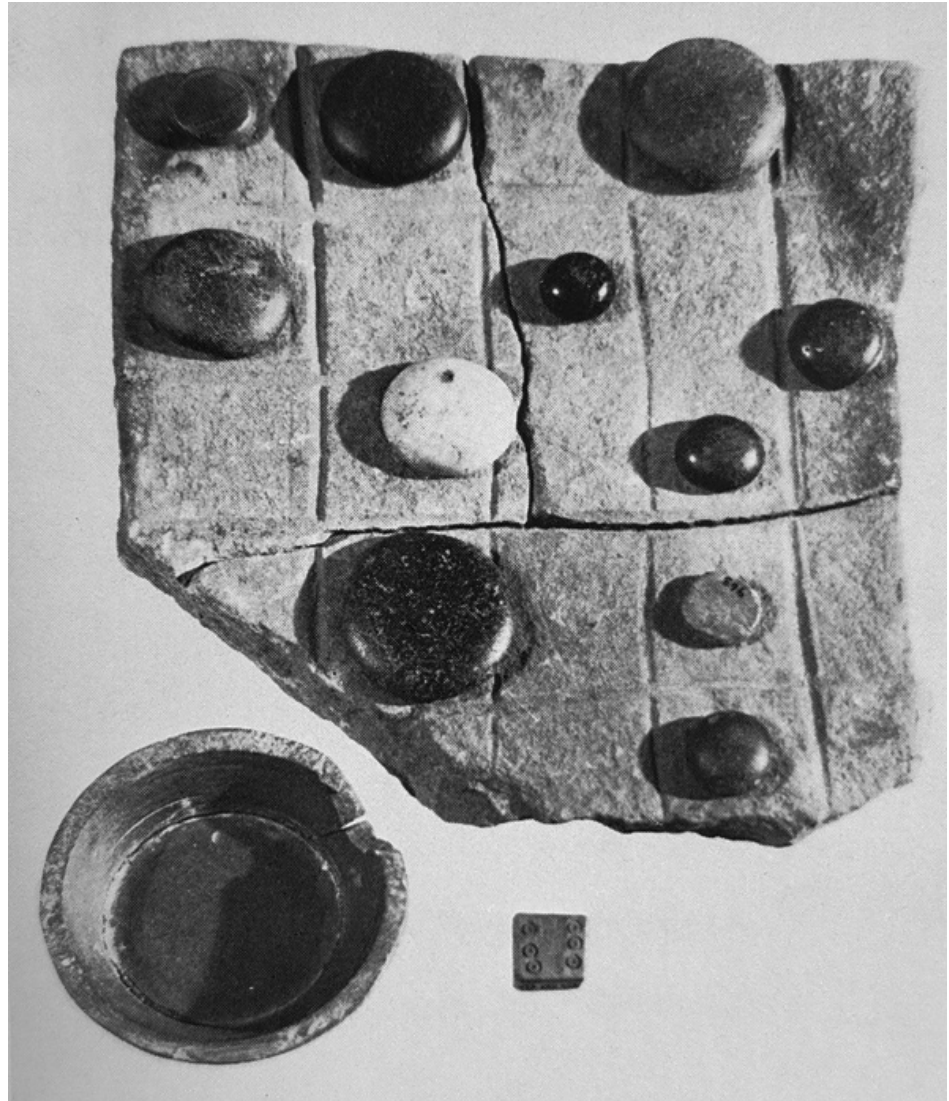


Figure 3. Gaming objects from the pre-Hadrianic fort of *Vindolanda* (after Birley 1977, plate 74).

different building traditions, and perhaps different tools, circulating among the *auxilia* that were responsible for the construction of the defensive structures (Russel *et al.* 2022, 202-203).

We have highlighted the strong identity of the soldiers belonging to *Cohors VIII Batavorum* to underline how these people, although already enduring intense cultural pressure during the 1st century AD, were still not totally Romanized at the very beginning of the 2nd century AD (Derks 2009, 264). They instead showed strong cultural resistance to Roman penetration, as well as a strong identity built around their sense of ethnic belonging. The relationship of the Batavians with Rome was incredibly complex, and it cannot be reduced to linear dynamics of passive cultural homologation. The very perception that the Batavians had of themselves was the result of a continuous negotiation process between their self-representation and the image that outsiders projected

onto them. In this game of mirrors, the Romans favored the creation of a strong sense of identity focused around the warlike qualities of the *Batavi*, the *ferox gens* par excellence, to exploit their human capital. Based on an *antiqua societas* the Batavians were exempt from tributes: “free from the burdens and obligations to contribute, they are reserved exclusively for battle and kept aside for war as if they were arrows or weapons” (Tacitus *Germania* 29). It is not surprising then that during the pre-Flavian period there were already eight cohorts of Batavian infantry, in addition to one *ala* of cavalry, not to mention the many who served in the Imperial guard or other non-Batavian units (like Iulius Briganticus, nephew of Iulius Civilis). This intense recruitment likely exerted heavy demographic and cultural stress on a population that, according to calculations, amounted to less than 35,000 people. Certainly, military service became a distinctive trait of a good portion of its members, promoting the collective self-

awareness of belonging to a community of *milites* (Derks & Roymans 2006, 131).

Likely, the Batavian men who went home having obtained Roman citizenship after a long military service had a fundamental role in modifying the social structure and cultural profile of the population, as they spread the new lifestyles they had learned and adopted during the years spent in the army. Veterans played an important role both in the progressive alphabetization of the population (as demonstrated by the diffusion of writing instruments), and in the progressive self-identification of the Batavians as a community of soldiers, as clearly shown by the social value gained by weapons, displayed even in civilian contexts as a status symbol. Notwithstanding the increasing external pressure to adopt foreign lifestyles, it is clear that at the beginning of the 2nd century the romanization of the Batavian territory was still far from complete. This is demonstrated for instance by the continuity of numerous local customs that seem to have been particularly resistant to external influences, particularly in the funerary sphere. There is then no reason to doubt that the *peregrini* who made up the ranks of *Cohors VIII Batavorum* were individuals not used to a Roman lifestyle when they were drafted, but who were bound to learn these new customs during the long years of military service (Pace 2022, 166).

In recent years scholars have also stressed the importance of everyday activities as a tool employed by the Roman army to forge and modify the cultural identity of soldiers belonging to units characterized by a strong collective spirit, like the Batavians (Petruț 2012, 93). Exposing the recruits to a new lifestyle characterized by previously unknown practices (new habits in terms of food, hygiene, clothes, etc.), and more broadly inserting them in a new, rigidly organized daily routine had a strong impact on their psychology, both as individuals and as a group (Bowman 2006, 83-86; Petruț 2012, 102). The threats that could potentially result from a too cohesive unit are well explained in a passage of Tacitus in which a whole cohort of *Usipi* drafted in Germany and sent, much like the Batavians, to *Britannia*, had rebelled *en masse*. They “killed their commander and the soldiers that had been inserted in the *manipuli* to teach them discipline, and to be an example and guides for the Germans” (Tacitus *Agricola* 28.1-3). Unlike the *Usipi*, the Batavian *tirones* in *Vindolanda* were getting used to going to the baths (certainly already existing in period III: Birley 2002, 67), learning how to write, and dealing with army regulations as well as a new command chain. All of these activities were plausibly made easier by the constant example offered by their officers and instructors, as well as their countrymen who had been living in this way for years.

In this context, it is then particularly suggestive to point out the presence of dice and counters (fig. 3) in the occupation phase of *Cohors Batavorum* (periods II and III: Birley 1994, 50-76; Birley 2003, 14). These are the same types of objects

often found in military contexts not only in *Britannia*, but also in many other provinces, although in the vast majority of cases these are fortresses, and therefore inhabited by Roman citizens (Cool & Baxter 2002, 367). The objects found in *Vindolanda* did not come with the soldiers, considering their almost complete absence in the Batavian region (Pace 2020, 323). It is clear that the Batavian soldiers were introduced to and learned how to play these games during their years in service of the Roman army in *Britannia*. The most common gaming tools are the counters, made of different materials, and this suggests that the ludic activities were mostly board games. The scarcity of dice and the widespread presence on the site of *tabulae latrunculariae* point specifically towards the *ludus latrunculorum* (Courts & Penn 2019, 11-12), a game that can be compared to modern-day checkers (Schädler 1994). We cannot know whether the games taking place in the fort followed traditional rules or local variants, but what matters in this context is the cultural value that playing these games held in the everyday life experience of the auxiliary soldiers. *Ludus*, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, fulfills an important social function as it can create a *communitas* among players, replicating the spirit of camaraderie forged between comrades who share burdens and dangers. Games were then an ice-breaking tool, a ‘social lubricant’ allowing newcomers to mix in with others who had been living in the fort for some time, be they instructors or simple soldiers. Playing games probably also had the practical function of helping soldiers constructively spend their spare time, exercising acumen and intelligence, and avoiding inactivity that could harm their discipline (Vespa 2020, 88-93).

But there is more. It is not a coincidence that the games found in *Vindolanda* among the Batavians were board games. Ancient writers had already understood and stressed the importance of these ludic activities. If learned during infancy, they could in fact help people to understand their place in society as part of a *kosmos* regulated by rules. To conclude, it seems evident that *ludus* allowed the creation of new social spaces and favoured the integration of individuals coming from foreign cultural contexts (and certainly extraneous to Roman culture) by introducing them, in an informal way, to a new world regulated by rules that could also be learned through playing games.

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Abbreviation

TV: *Tabulae Vindolandeses*

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