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## Playing with Batavians. Games as an educational tool for a Romano more vivere

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**1 DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE**  
**GESTES RITUELS. DE LA TRACE À L'INTERPRÉTATION**

**114 ACTUALITÉ DE LA RECHERCHE**  
**GÉOSCIENCES ET ARCHÉOLOGIE : INTERACTIONS, COMPLÉMENTARITÉS  
ET PERSPECTIVES**

**VARIA**

**294 Nicolas DELFERRIÈRE, Marie-Anaïs JANIN**

Querelle épigraphique entre deux savants : l'exemple de la correspondance, publiée dans la *Revue archéologique* de 1847, entre Antoine-Jean Letronne et Jules Chevrier à propos de deux inscriptions de Bourbon-Lancy (71)

**304 Julián GALLEGO**

Entre le courage et la peur : politisation et dépolitisation du peuple athénien

▶ **317 Alessandro PACE**

Playing with Batavians. Games as an educational tool for a *Romano more vivere*

**327 Véronique PITCHON**

Luxe (taraf) et raffinement (zarf) à la table abbasside

## PLAYING WITH BATAVIANS. GAMES AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL FOR A ROMANO MORE VIVERE

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### ABSTRACT

Recent research has underlined how games can serve as powerful tools for the creation of new social spaces, bridging different ethnic and cultural groups, both in the present and in the past. The scope of this paper is to explore whether games can offer new insights into that process of cultural cooptation that brought in contact the Roman world and the various ethnic groups that were progressively absorbed into Rome's orbit following its political and military expansion.

In Roman *Britannia*, the presence of typically Roman game devices at sites that were occupied

by the *auxilia* is key to understand certain aspects of the process of Romanisation. These testimonies reveal how, during their years of military service, non-Roman soldiers had the opportunity to come into contact with customs and habits of the *romano more vivere*. Among such practices, an important role was played by game.

### KEYWORDS

*Ludus*,  
game,  
dice,  
boardgames,  
*Britannia*,  
Romanisation,  
*Vindolanda*,  
*Batavi*.

Les recherches récentes ont montré que les jeux sont des outils puissants, aujourd'hui comme hier, de création de nouveaux espaces sociaux qui associent différents groupes ethniques et culturels. Il est ainsi intéressant de se focaliser sur les jeux afin de proposer un nouvel éclairage sur les dynamiques qui ont mis en contact le monde romain avec les divers groupes ethniques progressivement absorbés dans l'orbite de Rome à la suite de son expansion politique et militaire. Le but de cet article est de comprendre si le jeu peut offrir de nouvelles pistes interprétatives afin de mieux saisir le processus de cooptation culturelle.

Dans plusieurs sites britanniques, occupés par les *auxilia*, la présence d'objets ludiques typiquement romains contribue à la compréhension de certains aspects du processus de romanisation. Ces témoignages amènent un nouveau regard sur la manière par laquelle ces soldats non-romains ont eu la possibilité, pendant leur service militaire, d'entrer en contact avec les usages et les coutumes du *romano more vivere*. Parmi ces pratiques, une place centrale est occupée par le jeu.

### MOTS-CLÉS

*Ludus*,  
jeux,  
dés,  
jeux de plateau,  
*Britannia*,  
romanisation,  
*Vindolanda*,  
*Batavi*

Recent researches have underlined how games served as powerful tools in the creation of new social spaces, bridging different ethnic and cultural groups, both in the present and in the past [1]. The study of the material data for games can shed new light on the dynamics that played out at the points of contact between the Roman world and the various ethnic groups that were progressively absorbed into it [2]. The scope of this paper is to explore how material sources for games can offer new insights into the complex cultural phenomenon conventionally known as Romanisation [3].

I have already addressed some of these issues in a preliminary article [4], but the present contribution will develop in depth how the *ludus* could play a key role in the spreading of a new Roman lifestyle among the *peregrini*, the non-Roman citizens in the Roman Empire. A specific attention will be focused on some contexts in Roman *Britannia*, such as *Vindolanda* [5], occupied by auxiliary units of *auxilia* (auxiliary troops). The presence of typically Roman gaming devices in these sites testifies the role played by the game in the diffusion of new lifestyle habits, also in the case of soldiers, as the *Batavi*, very conservative from a cultural point of view.

## GAMES OF THE AUXILIA

*Auxilia* were extraordinary instruments in both a military and cultural viewpoint. On the one hand, they represented a fundamental addition to the legions on the battlefield and during military campaigns [6]. On the other, they were a key element in the process of Romanisation. After receiving their coveted citizenship upon completion of 25 years of military service, they became powerful vectors of the penetration of Roman culture into the provinces [7]. The Romans favoured a process of « bottom-up » Romanisation in the most remote areas of the Empire.

In Roman *Britannia*, the presence of Roman-type game pieces in some sites occupied by the *auxilia* is important to understanding certain aspects of Romanisation. These testimonies shed light on how, during their years of military service, these non-Roman soldiers had the possibility to come in contact with the practices and customs of the *romanum more vivere*. Among other practices, game and gambling played an important role.

Data from Chesterholm (*Vindolanda*) are instructive as regards this process [8]. *Vindolanda* was an important strategic node in the northern defensive

[1] HALL & FORSYTH 2011, p. 1335; HALL 2019, p. 200; DASEN & SCHÄDLER 2019.

[2] DASEN 2019, p. 128.

[3] TERRANATO 2008; HAYNES 2013, p. 21; HARDING 2017, p. 195-197.

[4] PACE 2015.

[5] BIRLEY 1977; BIRLEY 1994; BIRLEY 2012; BIRLEY 2016.

[6] LE BOHEC 1992, p. 34-38; FIELDS 2006, p. 47-52; GILLIVER 2011, p. 193-197; WESCH-KLEIN 2011, p. 435; HAYNES 2013.

[7] For example, an important role in the process of Romanisation of the Batavians seems to have been played by auxiliary veterans, DERKS & ROYMANS 2006. On *auxilia* see also LE BOHEC 1992, p. 34-38.

[8] BIRLEY 1977; BIRLEY 1994; BOWMAN 2006, p. 77-90.

system of *Britannia*. After the Agricolan military campaigns in the Highlands, a defensive system was consolidated along the so-called « Stanegate » Road” [9], which connected Carlisle (*Lugovalium*) with Corbridge (*Coria*) (fig. 1). This arrangement was further reinforced with the construction of Hadrian’s Wall [10]. Thorough excavations and well-preserved finds have produced a wealth of data from *Vindolanda*. Research has shown that the fort was rebuilt in wood several times between the end of the 80s AD and the beginning of the construction of Hadrian’s Wall [11]. It was occupied by three cohorts of auxiliary soldiers: the I Cohort of the *Tungri* [12], and the III and IX Cohorts of the *Batavi*, though it is uncertain whether their occupation was simultaneous or at different times [13]. The excavations have unearthed Roman gaming equipment in stratigraphic layers that can be linked to the presence of these military units. Numerous gaming pieces, generally of bone but also of lead and glass, have been found in different areas of the camp, including inside the large

wooden building that could be interpreted as a *praetorium* [14]. Bone dice and fragments belonging to stone *tabulae lusoriae* have also been found in the same areas of the fort [15] (fig. 2).

In the case of *Vindolanda* as well as in other instances, it is difficult to establish whether the games that were played with typically Roman pieces were Roman, if they followed different rules, or were perhaps some sort of hybrid; even today, rules of games can differ from one region to the other and even from one community to the other [16].

These findings are particularly interesting because the *auxilia* that are considered here (the *Tungri* and especially the *Batavi*) had been recruited among the

[9] HODGSON 2000; BIRLEY 2016, p. 250.

[10] OPPER 2008, p. 80-81.

[11] BIRLEY 1994; BIRLEY 2012, p. 4.

[12] TONDEUR 2012; NOUWEN 1995; NOUWEN 1997, p. 461-462.

[13] BIRLEY 1997, p. 273-274; BOWMAN 1994, p. 14-27; BOWMAN & THOMAS 1994, p. 22-24.

[14] BIRLEY 1994, p. 87-88.

[15] BIRLEY 1977, p. 130, fig. 74; for a *corpus* of gaming boards from Roman Britannia see COURTS & PENN 2019.

[16] SCHÄDLER 2019; DE VOGT 2019, p. 90-92.

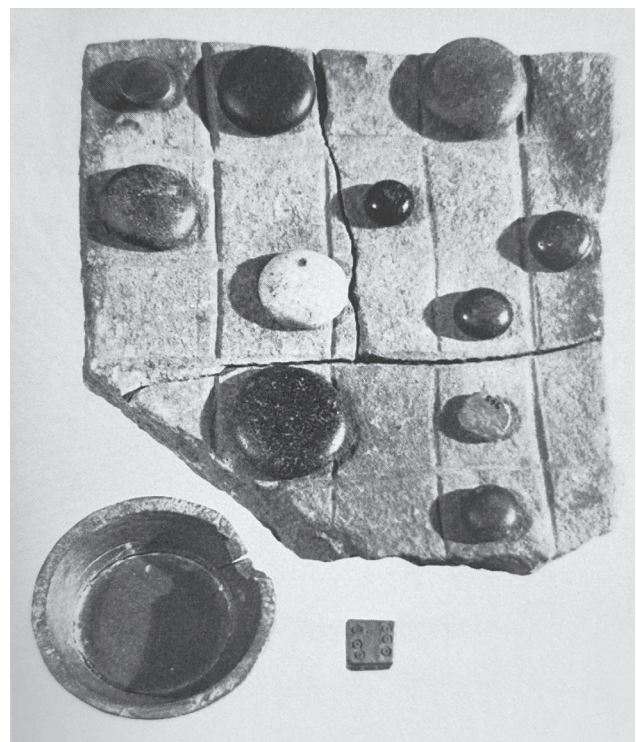
Figure 1

Roman *Britannia* with the placement of *Vindolanda* (1) and *Coria* (2). Drawing of the author.



Figure 2

Ludic pieces from *Vindolanda*: fragments of a stone boardgame, a bone die, glass counters and a *fritillus* (?). Reworked from BIRLEY 1977, p. 130, fig. 74.



German populations that were stationed along the lower course of the Rhine where Romanisation was still an ongoing process [17].

The finds from *Vindolanda* thus confirm the imperial strategy of using troops and officials from newly conquered territories as instruments of control and Romanisation for the new provinces. This approach is further demonstrated by the *nomina* of the *praefectus* of the IX Cohort of the *Batavi*, *Flavius Cerialis*, who belonged to a family, that had only just obtained Roman citizenship [18]. Enlisting in the Roman army, therefore, offered to the *auxilia* the opportunity to experience a new lifestyle on a daily basis, as suggested by the presence of buildings such as baths or amphitheatres also found in the auxiliary forts in *Britannia* and in other sites along the northern borders of Roman Britain [19]. This new way of life was encouraged by the examples of their superiors, who were all *cives romani*, as in the case of *Flavius Cerialis*.

Corbridge (*Coria*) was another key site in the Roman defensive system, where the presence of *auxilia* is also attested from the Flavian age to the period after the erection of Hadrian's Wall [20]. Here, as in *Vindolanda*, excavations have unearthed game pieces such as dice, dice shakers, and stone *tabulae lusoriae* (probably to interpret such as *tabulae latrunculariae*) [21], of several dimensions [22] (fig. 3).

It is worth noting that the gaming pieces used by these auxiliary units are of the same typologies as those found in other legionary fortresses located in *Britannia* [23], and in other provinces of

the Empire [24]. The same objects have also been found in camps that were occupied by auxiliary units composed of *cives romani*, such as in the case of the *Ala II Flavia Hispanorum civium Romanorum* stationed at *Petavonium* in *Hispania Tarraconensis*.

The *Ala II Flavia* was active at *Petavonium* in the late first and early second centuries AD (fig. 4), a chronological range that overlaps with the ones discussed so far. In contrast with the troops of non-Roman citizens present in *Britannia*, the *Ala II Flavia* was composed of Roman citizens, as testified by its name [25], but the game tools are of the same typologies. It is impossible to say if games played by the auxiliary troops on duty along Hadrian's Wall followed Roman rules or they had different ones; however but comparing the evidence from the various contexts, it is evident that the game pieces are the same typology even although those at *Vindolanda* and Corbridge were not used by Roman citizens (fig. 5-6).

[17] ROYMANS 1993; SPEIDEL 1994, p. 43; DERKS & ROYMANS 2002; SLOFSTRA 2002; VAN DRIEL-MURRAY 2003; ROYMANS 2004; VAN ROSSUM 2004; VAN DRIEL-MURRAY 2005; DERKS 2009; ROYMANS 2009; VAN DRIEL-MURRAY 2012.

[18] BOWMAN 1994, p. 20-21.

[19] BIRLEY 2001b; BOWMAN 2006, p. 87; BREEZE 2006; SOMMER 2009; HAYNES 2013, p. 171.

[20] HODGSON 2008; DORE 1989, p. 31; BISHOP & DORE 1988, p. 3.

[21] SCHÄDLER 1994; SCHÄDLER 2013.

[22] AUSTIN 1934, p. 26-27, fig. 2; ALLASON-JONES & BISHOP 1988, p. 82.

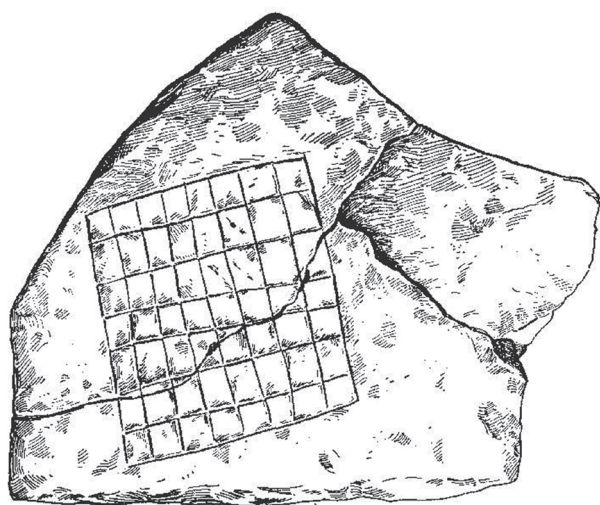


Figure 3  
*Tabula latruncularia* from *Coria*.  
Reworked from AUSTIN 1934, fig. 2.



Figure 4  
The location of *Petavonium*  
(satellite image from Google Maps).

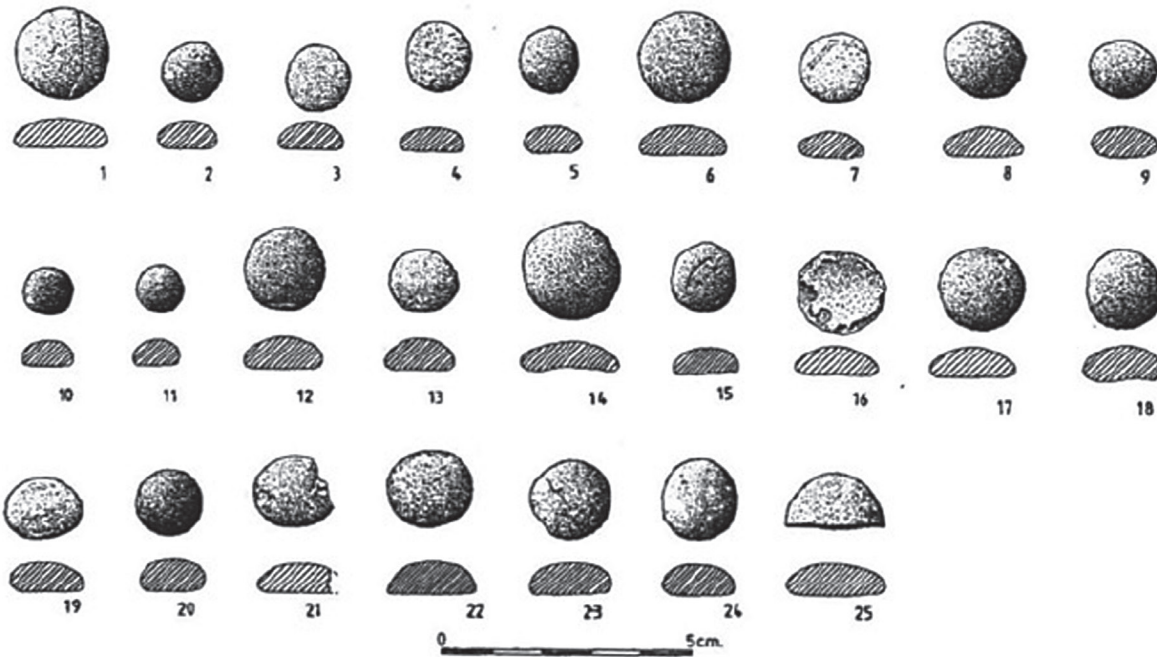


Figure 5

Glass counters from *Petavonium*. Reworked from CARRETERO VAQUERO 1998, fig. 3.

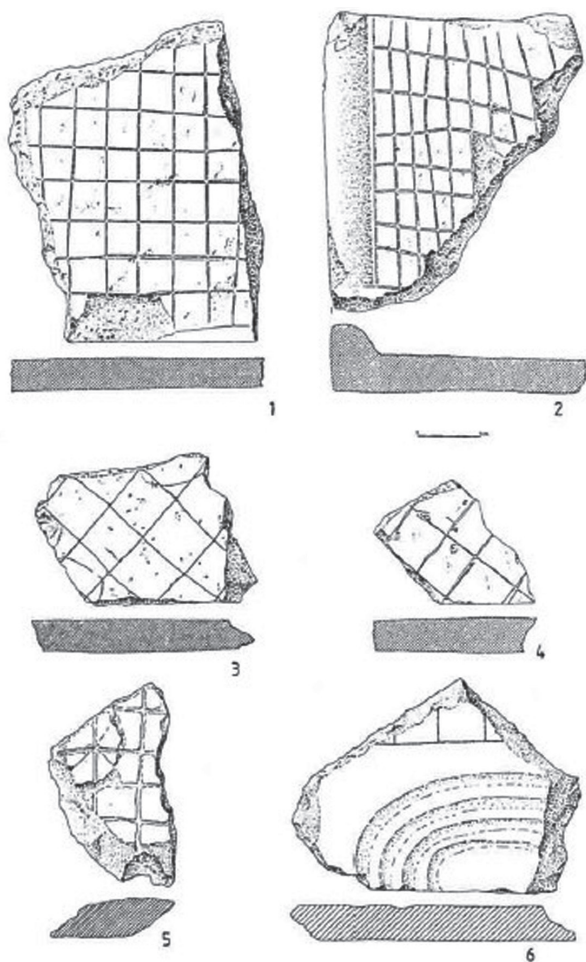


Figure 6

Fragments of *tabulae latrunculariae* from *Petavonium*. Reworked from CARRETERO VAQUERO 1998, fig. 2.

## THE CORBRIDGE HOARD

The Corbridge Hoard represents a particularly telling case. In 1964 a wooden box was discovered containing a large quantity of objects, including weapons and part of a *lorica segmentata*. Among the material preserved are 47 black and white glass counters [26] (fig. 7). The large number and varied dimensions of these pieces indicate that they belonged to a collection rather than a complete set used for a single game.

The hoard was buried between the second and third phases of the site's occupation. This timeframe covers the first years of Hadrian's reign and the subsequent visit of the emperor to *Britannia* [27], a period characterised by a general instability, followed by the reorganisation of the defensive system and the erection of Hadrian's Wall [28].

Past scholarship has suggested that the large number of military tools and the fragments of the *lorica segmentata* in the hoard, indicate that the box once belonged to a legionary. The soldier may have

[23] COOL & BAXTER 2002, p. 370.

[24] HINTERMANN 2012, p. 143-144.

[25] CARRETERO VAQUERO 1998.

[26] ALLASON-JONES & BISHOP 1988, p. 82-83.

[27] BISHOP & DORE 1988, p. 140; ALLASON-JONES & BISHOP 1988, p. 5-7.

[28] GRAAFSTAL 2018.



Figure 7

The Corbridge Hoard. Reworked from ALLASON-JONES & BISHOP 1988.

buried the box in the event of the sudden departure of his unit expecting to return, a return that never occurred. The many *loricae segmentatae* that have been found at sites certainly occupied by *auxilia* should caution us against creating a direct link between this kind of armour and legionaries [29]. On the one hand, it is not possible to exclude that the *auxilia* were also equipped with *lorica segmentata*. On the other hand, we can hypothesise the presence of mixed troops composed of both legionaries and *auxilia*, at the same site. This scenario is especially possible in cases such as Corbridge, where objects that are unlikely to have pertained to *auxilia* have been found, such as *pila* and *ballista* projectiles [30]. The evidence leaves the problem open and difficult to resolve.

It is, however, probable that the material from Corbridge was destined for a blacksmith's workshop or to the *fabrica* of the unit stationed at the site. This is suggested by the fact that the hoard was mainly composed of fragments of damaged weapons. It is therefore possible that the material was kept to be repaired or to melt the pieces that were no longer usable [31]. In view of this, it is not possible to establish whether the box belonged to a legionary, an auxiliary, or an artisan who worked with the unit.

The inclusion of the gaming pieces in the material of the hoard is, however, significant. The owner clearly granted them great importance when he included the set among the objects to be preserved.

## GAME AND SOCIAL SPACES. *LUDUS* FOR BECOMING *CIVES ROMANI*

To conclude, the contexts that have been discussed in this paper allow us to underline how the game provided an environment particularly suitable for interactions between different ethnic groups. In this perspective, analysis of the situation of the auxiliary troops quartering at *Vindolanda*, especially those composed by Batavian soldiers, is significant.

Combining the archaeological data with the information gleaned from the rich *corpus* of inscribed tablets found *in loco*, it is possible to observe that these troops maintained their strong identity thanks to continuous arrivals of new recruits from the homeland [32], as an onomastic study has underlined [33].

This situation seems to be further confirmed at *Vindolanda* by the presence of objects such as greyware beakers [34], which belonged to a ceramic tradition typical of the place of origin of both the *Batavi* and the *Tungri* [35], also settled in *Vindolanda*.

The soldiers of these auxiliary units also maintained their dietary habits during their time in the Roman army, as suggested by the text of a tablet found at *Vindolanda* [36], in which *Masclus*, *decurio* of *IX cohors Batavorum*, writes to the *praefectus Flavius Cerialis*, the command officer of the unit, to ask for orders and to have beer to give to the soldiers [37].

Beer consumption, which was apparently preferred by the Batavian soldiers over the more « Roman »

[29] GILLIVER 2011, p. 194; SIM & KAMINSKI 2012, p. 135.

[30] ALLASON-JONES & BISHOP 1988, p. 110.

[31] ALLASON-JONES & BISHOP 1988, p. 109-110.

[32] HAYNES 2001, p. 68-71.

[33] BIRLEY 2001a; BIRLEY 2008.

[34] SWAN 2009 p. 67-95; HAYNES 2013, p. 105; McLAUGHLIN 2018, p. 186.

[35] On the Batavian pottery see also STOFFELS 2008; COLLINS, VAN ENCKEVORT & HENDRIKS 2009.

[36] *Tab. Vindol.* III, 628; BOWMAN 1994, p. 133-134, n. 29; BOWMAN & THOMAS 1996, p. 323-326, n. 3.

[37] BOWMAN & THOMAS 1996, p. 323-326, n. 3; CUFF 2011, p. 146; HAYNES 2013, p. 180; McLAUGHLIN 2018, p. 169-170.



choice of wine or *posca* (watered-down sour wine mixed with herbs), seems to reflect sociocultural preferences [38]. The close relationship with customs of their homeland does not seem to have only been restricted to their choice of beverage, but also to food. A tablet with a list of ingredients, found in what seems to have been the kitchen of the *praetorium* of the encampment, suggested that it was used by *Cerialis*' staff to select and prepare meals for the troops [39].

The usage of the word *batavico* [40], which was probably intended to indicate something prepared in a Batavian way (*batavico more paratum*), is very significant in this reading [41].

The close links with customs from their homeland seem to have gone behind the material sphere, and also concerned social structure. It is instructive to note that, in tablet 628 [42] from *Vindolanda*, *Masclus* addresses *Flavius Cerialis* as « *rex* » [43]. The value of this word has been hotly debated; whether it should be understood as « patron » [44] or whether it testifies to a relationship of subordination between *Masclus* and *Flavius Cerialis*, which wouldn't be explicable by their different ranks performed within in the Roman army.

*Masclus* seems to have been a *peregrinus*, on the basis of his single name, whereas *Cerialis* was a *civis romanus*, who probably descended from a family of the Batavian nobility.

His *nomen* suggests that he was a member of Batavian nobility who remained loyal to the Empire during the revolt of *Iulius Civilis*; *Cerialis* would refer to *Petillius Cerialis* who had been appointed

by *Vespasian* to put down *Civilis*' uprising, whereas the name *Flavius* testifies to the loyalty of his family during the revolt [45].

Therefore, the title « *rex* » used by the *decurio Masclus* to address *Flavius Cerialis* cannot be explained by his rank of *praefectus* of *IX cohors Batavorum*, rather it would refer to the *nobilitas* of his family and would attest to the existence of tribal links that were « institutionalised » within the auxiliary unit.

The strong ethnic identity demonstrated by the *Batavi* (as regards beer, food, and social recognition) seems at odds with the Roman gaming pieces found in *Vindolanda* [46]. These dice, game boards and counters are of the same typologies as those found in legionary fortresses located in *Britannia* – for instance *Isca Silurum* [47] or *Eburacum* [48] – that were employed by the legionaries who were *cives romani*. These same objects are notably absent from the regions of the Lower Rhine [49], thus indicating the adherence of the Batavian soldiers to some aspects of the Roman lifestyle.

We cannot know exactly what kind of games were played by the Batavians, as it is impossible to say whether they were « Roman » games, or if they had different rules [50]. However, it is evident that the gaming accoutrements seem to have represented a common language spoken by people with different social and ethnic backgrounds. In this perspective, ludic activities provided a « cultural link » between several ethnic groups that co-existed within the complex Roman state structure, constituting the first ground of encounter and serving as a crucial tool for cultural « homologation » [51]. ■

[38] BOWMAN 2006, p. 87; McLAUGHLIN 2018, p. 171.

[39] BIRLEY 1997; PEARCE 2002; BOWMAN 2006, p. 87; HAYNES 2013, p. 180-181; McLAUGHLIN 2018, p. 178.

[40] *Tab. Vindol.* II, 208.2.

[41] On the relationship between the Roman presence and changes in food consumption and production in *Britannia* see VAN DER VEEN 2008; on food and identity see TAYLOR 2015.

[42] *Tab. Vindol.* III, 628.

[43] CUFF 2011; McLAUGHLIN 2018, p. 170.

[44] BOWMAN & THOMAS 1996, p. 324.

[45] CUFF 2011, p. 154-155.

[46] ROYMANS 2014, p. 242.

[47] ZIENKIEWICZ 1986.

[48] COOL & BAXTER 2002, p. 367.

[49] I would like to thank Professor Stijn Heeren (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) for this information.

[50] SCHÄDLER 2019.

[51] About the game as « social lubricant » see CRIST & DE VOOGT DUNN-VATURI 2016; HALL 2019, p. 200; DE VOOGT 2019, p. 90.

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