CURRENT APPROACHES TO ROMAN FRONTIERS

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

LIMES XXV VOLUME 1

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Reception of the limes in cities along the Rhine and the Danube (16th and 17th centuries)

Konrad A. Ottenheym

From the second half of the 15th century, growing interest in Roman antiquity in general also stimulated scholarly debate on local legacies of classical antiquity north of the Alps. Humanists and antiquarians studied ancient texts for clues about the events of their own region in Roman times (Helmrath *et al.* 2002). From historical writings, such as those of Caesar and Tacitus, it was clear that the Rhine and Danube had been the northern border of the Roman Empire and that this frontier was guarded by larger and smaller military fortifications. In both the Low Countries and Germany, scholars tried to connect these ancient histories and places with contemporary geography, using ancient geographical descriptions such as those by Strabo, Ptolemaeus, and the so-called Peutinger Map (Boschung & Schäfer 2019). In the 16th century also material remains and soil finds began to be used as sources for this kind of research. Visible remnants, from small objects to (ruins of) buildings, were used as proofs of the supposed continuity from the glorious Roman past to their own time, as testimony of old age and standing of certain privileges or power structures (Enenkel & Ottenheym 2019). This paper will focus on the various ways this knowledge about the Roman limes was subsequently deployed by urban authorities in the late 16th and 17th centuries, comparing the free imperial cities in the German lands with the almost autonomous cities of the Dutch Republic.

The rediscovery of the limes along Rhine and Danube

In 1508 Desiderius Erasmus (*c.* 1469-1536) was the first humanist in Holland who posit the brave but civilised Batavians as ancestors of the Dutch (Wesseling 1993). In the following decades Erasmus' contemporaries Gerard Geldenhouwer (1482-1542) and Cornelius Aurelius (1460-1531) began the actual research on local Roman and Batavian antiquities in the Northern Low Countries (Enenkel & Ottenheym 2019, 151-183). The Batavians were regarded as a civilised community living in proper cities, and as 'friends and brothers of the Roman Empire' (Aurelius 1611, 99). Accordingly, the Romans protected the country against 'barbarians' and 'pirates' with strong castles along the river Rhine (Aurelius 1517, fol. 91v). Aurelius mentions for instance the *Arx Brittanica* / *Brittenburg* at Katwijk, the castle hill in Leiden and the ruins of castle *Roomburg* (Aurelius 1611, 106). In fact, these were the remains of a 13th-century seat of the van Rodenburg family, but interpreted as *Roomse-burcht i.e.* 'Roman castle'. This misinterpretation can easily be explained since

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Roomburg was near the site of the ancient *castellum Matilo* and, indeed, several Roman stones and objects were found here (Brandenburgh & Hessing 2014).

Almost simultaneously with these first attempts by Aurelius and Geldenhouwer to identify Roman *castella* along the Rhine, the same happened in Bavaria along the Danube. A key figure here was Johannes Aventinus (1477-1534) (Schmid 2019). In 1517 he was commissioned by the Duke of Bavaria to write a complete chronicle of Bavaria, a job that would take him a total of eleven years. In preparation, he visited libraries and archives in monasteries, towns and castles. As one of the first in Southern Germany, Aventinus also actively searched for material evidence of Bavaria's ancient past, such as ancient coins, tokens, tombstones and old buildings. He considered the Danube as the northern border of the Roman Empire and many towns, ancient castles, or remnants thereof, along the river, he tried to identify as the remains of the various limes fortifications mentioned in ancient texts (Ottenheym 2022). As far as is known, he was also the first to identify this series of *castella* and *castra* as a coherent chain of fortifications along the border: "the Danube and the Rhine were the borders of the ancient, Italian Roman Empire and imperial power against Germany, equipped with all the required martial forces. (…) So there was one Roman force after another, as the ancient fortresses, with all the ancient stones and Roman inscriptions show" (Aventinus 1881, 260-261).

The German imperial cities and their ancient roots

Most German historians of the 16th century, including Aventinus, were strong supporters of the idea of the *translatio imperii*, the idea that the universal Empire was not lost with the downfall of the western emperor in Rome. According to them and their princely patrons, the country had been part of the Empire from Julius Caesar's times onwards. With the coronation of Charlemagne in the year 800, the Empire continued to exist. Since then the imperial dignity had been transferred to all his successors, without interruption, until Maximilian I and Charles V in the 16th century. These two emperors emphatically portrayed this idea in their public displays and other forms of representation (Checa Cremades 1987; Müller 1982; Wood 2005). For Charles V, the comparison with the Roman Empire was self-evident: as emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and as King of Spain (which also included Southern Italy and Sicily and the colonies in the Americas), his realm was indeed comparable to that of the ancient Roman emperors.

The Holy Roman Empire included many different kinds of territories, each with its own type of leader. At the top, right after the emperor, were the seven electors, followed by other prince-bishops and powerful abbots of the imperial abbeys and various kinds of lords, from princes and counts to petty barons and knights. At the bottom of the hierarchy of the Empire's political structure were the *c*. 50 free imperial cities. In this case 'free' means that these cities had no regional over-lord, such as a duke or a prince-bishop. Instead, they stood immediately under the supreme authority of the emperor (Moraw 1979). The emperor's actual influence in the day-to-day affairs of these cities was limited in practice; the bonus for the emperor lay in the tax revenues from these cities. Every few years, all rulers of the Empire, including the imperial cities, were convened by the emperor for joint deliberations, the so-called 'Reichstag'. Until the 1660's these meetings took place in one of the major free imperial cities (later the Reichstag remained permanently in Regensburg). Hosting the Reichstag was a great honour for the cities and sometimes they competed with each other for the role of host.

Not only the emperor and the high nobility used their (real or presumed) ancient roots in public display, also the imperial cities brought their Roman past to the fore in words and images, when defining their position within the Empire's political structures. Although the emperors had designated most of the 'free imperial cities' between the 13th and 15th century, many cities sought the origins of their special relationship with the emperor back in Roman times. Imperial cities that could demonstrate an ancient origin, as a Roman *colonia*, *municipium* or just a *castellum*, could boast continuous ties with the emperor for almost 1500 years. With such historical roots, they could make it plausible that their cities had been part of the political structure of the Empire from its early days onwards, and that they weren't a *Fremdkörper* from later times, as most noblemen wanted to believe.

The imperial past could serve as rhetorical ammunition against contemporary territorial claims of surrounding feudal lords. The freedom of smaller imperial cities was increasingly threatened by their intrusive princes. During the 15th century, for example, the Duke of Bavaria had annexed two such cities. By linking their status of an imperial city to the Roman past, other cities tried to avoid a similar fate. With a demonstrable continuity of privileged connection with the emperor, from Julius Caesar up to Charles V, cities could counterbalance potentially 'historical' claims of surrounding greedy princes. The most important place to publicise one's own Roman history was the town hall. To this end there were various possibilities varying in scale and financial costs, as some examples show.

A humble solution was applicated in the small town of Weissenburg, next to the site of the former *castellum Biriciania*. Here, in 1567, a tower was added to the gothic town hall to house the city archives, with a decorative stone sculptured in high relief, showing two Romans in full

Figure 1. Weissenburg, townhall, memorial stone in the archive tower, 1567 (author).

armour presenting the city coat of arms and the imperial coat of arms with the double-headed eagle (fig. 1). The connection of city and emperor is thus literally supported by the Roman past.

A slightly more monumental elaboration of the same idea, can be found in Kempten. It was known in the 16th century that the Roman city of *Cambodunum* had been located here, but where exactly was not yet clear. In reality, it was on the other side of the river (where today is the archaeological park), but in early modern times it was believed that the castle hill next to the city centre had been the ancient *Cambodunum* (Ott 2002, 266-269). Kempten is also home to the important St. Lorenz Abbey, headed by an abbot who also held the title of imperial prince. The city had been engaged in a dispute with the abbot over its independence from the abbey since the 14th century. This conflict intensified when the city converted to Protestantism in 1525, while the abbey remained loyal to Catholicism. The abbot's contention was that the city had come into existence only after the abbey was founded in 773 AD. The city council believed it could refute this argument with the city's Roman origins: Kempten was said to be the direct continuation of Roman *Cambodunum*, and had always been directly under the emperor even long before the arrival of the first abbot. To underline the city's Roman origins, in 1601 a fountain (fig. 2) was built in front of the medieval town hall, with an almost life-size statue of a Roman officer, representing the founders of the city and holding the coats of arms of both the city and the Empire (Weiß & Böck 1993).

Figure 2. Kempten, fountain in front of the townhall, 1601 (author).

Something similar was at play in Cologne. The city, ancient *Colonia Claudia Ara Agrippinensium*, had been in conflict for several centuries with its own archbishop, who was also one of the electors of the realm. In 1268 the bishop was expelled from the city and since then he resided in nearby Bonn, but the bishop had never officially accepted the city's independence. In the 16th century, Cologne also had a great interest in its own Roman past. Especially among some traditional ruling families this was an important fact because in their circles lived the myth that their families descended from the Roman senators sent north by emperor Tiberius to rule the city. Members of these families were also the first collectors of Roman antiquities from Cologne. And in 1569-1573 they had a monumental *all'antica* loggia added to the Gothic town hall, with classical columns, antique-looking *tondi* with portraits of Roman emperors and with reliefs that referred to the city's medieval battle against the bishop (Kirgus 2003). Thus, local antiquity was used here to override the bishop's claims to power: Cologne traditionally belonged to the emperor, and its magistrates were loyal and accountable to the emperor only, that was the message expressed in this loggia.

The most monumental 'imperial' town hall was built in Augsburg in 1615, the ancient *Aelium Augustum* / *Augusta Vindelicorum*. Augsburg was a multi-denominational city where both Catholicism and Protestantism were allowed. The city's Roman origins had been undisputed since the early 16th century thanks to the work of humanists such as Conrad Celtis and Conrad Peutinger. By 1590-1594, a fountain with a bronze statue of emperor Augustus as the city's founder, by Munich sculptor Hubert Gerhard, had already appeared in front of the old city hall. Twenty years later, construction of the new city hall began. This seemed primarily intended to outdo the other major imperial cities and to provide Augsburg with a suitable home for the Reichstag, possibly in the hope that the emperor would therefore choose Augsburg as a meeting place more often. Both in scale and detail, the monumental building seems to emulate classical architecture (Baer *et al.* 1985). The rooms for the various magistrates and officials of the city administration were located on the ground floor and first floor. The grand second floor offered meeting facilities for the Reichstag, with the large central 'Golden Hall' and with rooms for the emperor and the electors. The murals of the great hall depicted a series of ancient, medieval and contemporary emperors, showing once again the continuity of the Roman and Holy Roman Empires and their strong connections with the city.

Even when a city had no ancient past al all, it could be considered important to simulate such lineage. This happened in Nuremberg, one of the major commercial and industrial cities of Central Europe and a free imperial city since 1254. At the highest point of the city stands the medieval imperial castle, where since 1424 the imperial regalia were kept. Nuremberg's prominent position within the imperial cities was evident, but an ancient origin could only be 'created' with some difficulty. After all, the city is situated some 100 km north of the Danube and this area never belonged to the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, already in the 15th century the legend had been developed that its history started with a military camp erected in 10 BC by Tiberius at the foot of the mountain and with a watchtower on top of it. After his full name, Tiberius Claudius Nero, the site was called '*Neronis-berg*', which subsequently became '*Nürnberg*' (Ott 2002, 263-266). Tangible evidence of its alleged Roman origin was identified in the oldest tower of the castle with the romanesque chapel (in fact a 12th-century construction), according to 15th-century chronicles said to be a former 'temple of Diana' (Ott 2010, 145).

The assumed ancient past of Holland's cities

In the Low Countries, the concept of free imperial city did not play a significant role in politics. Maximilian I had only raised a few cities to this status, in 1495, but Charles V put an end to their privileges shortly afterwards. By the time of the Dutch Republic (1585-1795), however, cities dominated provincial and national politics. In the government of the Province of Holland, 18 cities had one vote each, in addition to one vote for the nobility. The ranking of cities was determined by the year of their city rights: the oldest city in Holland was Dordrecht with charters from 1220, followed by Haarlem in 1245, Delft 1246, Leiden 1266, Amsterdam in 1306, *etc*. While the official hierarchy was defined, most cities tried to increase their age and their standing in relation to the other cities, by presenting a much older foundation date (Enenkel & Ottenheym 2019, 311-347). Occasionally they sought arguments for a Roman origin, as a former army camp along the limes. Such imagined histories were reported in city chronicles, which were usually written at the request of the relevant city administration. Sometimes these stories were also given a place in the decoration of public buildings, as the following examples illustrate.

In 1618, at the waterside of Dordrecht a new gate house was constructed called *Groothoofds Poort* (Great-Pier Gate). The decoration of this building refers to an obscure myth of the city's origin in Roman times. Above the gate, in blue stone, a two-storey building was erected in brick, with sculptured decorations in sandstone. The façade towards the city is articulated by a superposition of small pilasters, Ionic above Doric. The sculptured decorations accentuate the classical sprit of the design, with the heads of Hercules and Medusa above the windows in the upper zone and the bust of a Roman emperor directly above the gateway (fig. 3). On the façade overlooking the quay, there is a grand relief of the personification of the city, crowned

Figure 3. Dordrecht, Groothoofdspoort, 1618 (author).

by a bust of another Roman emperor. It is possible that the city authorities who commissioned the gate were inspired by a story told in 1577 by Dominicus Marius Niger in his description of the world. In his chapter on the Low Countries, Dominicus Marius mentions a city founded in 140 AD by emperor Antoninus Pius "at the northern tip of the island where the Meuse reaches the sea", first called *Benefacta* but later renamed as *Do*(r)*drana*, inhabited by 'Dordranesii' (Marius 1557, 57). The city was praised for its excellent people, strong walls, abundant riches and its favourable mercantile potential. One can well imagine that the 17th-century city authorities were pleased with such a story and were eager to use it as part of their unofficial claims to superior age (Van Beverwijck 1640, 75-82). However, apparently nobody in Dordrecht was interested in having a correct portrait of Antoninus Pius here, in the way that he was known from coins and print series, always with an elegant beard. The imperial heads presented on both façades of the gate do not resemble him in the least: the emperor figure above the gate seems to be inspired by Vespasian, while the other, overlooking the quayside, resembles Nero. For the purposes of illustrating the supposed Roman origin of the city, any emperor would do, apparently.

Also Delft had its own understanding of its 'true' age. The kernel of the settlement which later grew into Delft was said

Figure 4. Leiden, the castle hill, in early modern times regarded as *castellum Lugdunum* (public domain).

to have sprung up along the canal which the Roman general Corbulo had had dug in the 1st century AD. Thus the central canal of the city, called 'Oude Delft' was in fact regarded as part of the *fossa Corbulonis*. The 17th-century historian of Delft, Dirck van Bleysweijck, reported that the bottom sections of the tower of the Old Church (Oude Kerk), which stands practically on the quayside of Oude Delft, originated from a Roman watchtower which Corbulo had installed alongside his freshly-dug canal, as was customary along the military limes (Van Bleysweijck 1667, 45). He insisted that this tower was the oldest building in Delft and for many miles around, as was borne out by the tufa blocks used in its foundations. Later, as he had it, the first counts of Holland pronounced sentences at this tower, thereby gradually giving rise to the settlement from the 11th century onwards.

Obviously, also Leiden claimed to be much older than the date of 1266, the year of its city charter. Local historians had proclaimed the city's presumed ancient origin, identifying Leiden with the Roman fort of *Lugdunum* on the *Tabula Peutingeriana*: Jan Orlers (1614, 13-14) blithely wrote in his 1614 city history that Leiden, or *Lugdunum Batavorum*, was the centre of Holland and perhaps the province's oldest city, and older at any rate than Dordrecht or Haarlem, since they had no Roman history: "Leiden [is] not just old but the oldest and principal city of Holland, certainly older than Dordrecht and Haarlem". While those two cities assert their privileges, nobody, he dismissively adds, has ever seen the documents. The key proof of Leiden's great age was the round fort on the high motte at the confluence of two branches of the Rhine (fig. 4): "The fort, being an ornament to this city, is not only the first and oldest building which has stood in Leiden for several centuries but is even one of the very oldest establishments and fortresses of all Holland" (Orlers 1614, 59). It was generally believed that the city had come into being as a fishing village at the foot of that fortress, which was regarded as the best preserved Roman *castellum* along the limes. Opinions varied as to the exact date of construction. In the early 16th century, Aurelius proposed that Caesar had founded it. A century later somebody suggested it must have been Nero (Van Leeuwen 1672, 23 and 42). In the current state of historical knowledge, this dating would be almost a millennium too early: the first impulse to build a modest hill fort may have come around 1000 AD and it was raised in height around 1050, with the first ring-wall being raised around 1150 (subsequently repaired and fortified numerous times) (Van der Vlist 2001).

Elsewhere in the Republic there were a few cities of genuine Roman origins and the most important of these was Nijmegen. But here, too, several misunderstandings prevailed. Firstly, it was believed that the Julius Caesar himself had founded the fortress and the city during his campaign of 55 BC, whereas this would probably only happen half a century later in the time of Drusus and Tiberius. The designation of the location of the main settlement was also based on a misunderstanding. According to our current knowledge, there had been several Roman settlements around the later city of Nijmegen, first the *Oppidum Batavorum* in the centre of modern Nijmegen, more to the west the Roman town *Ulpia*

Figure 5. Nijmegen, Townhall (1555), entrance gate with Julius Caesar (right) and Charlemagne (left), post-1945 copies (P. van Galen, collection RCE).

Noviomagus, and the large military camp on the Hunerberg and the command post on the Kops Plateau (Willems & Van Enckevort 2009). From the late 15th century onwards, however, scholars in Nijmegen proposed that the Valkhof castle had been the centre of the Roman city, which in later centuries also Charlemagne had used as his palace. Indeed the Valkhof was located on the site of the last Roman defences from the late antiquity and indeed Charlemagne also had a residence here. But the ancient stronghold was subsequently destroyed and rebuilt by Emperor Barbarossa around 1155. The octagonal St. Nicholas Chapel on the castle grounds dated from the 11th century, with later repairs. Both because of its octagonal shape and because of the many ancient *spolia* used as building material in the walls, it was believed that this building must have been a former Roman temple. Moreover, a Roman tombstone of a certain Caius Julius Pudens and his son, reused at the entrance to the chapel, led some to believe it had been a temple in honour of the gods of the underworld, or otherwise the mausoleum of this Pudens (Ottenheym 2021, 372-378).

When in 1553-1554 a new entrance wing of town hall was built, sculptures on the facade clearly marked the Roman origins of the city (Schulte 1982). The upper windows were decorated with antique heads, while the front door was crowned by statues of Julius Caesar and Charlemagne, the presumed founders of the city (fig. 5). In the 1660's, in order to strengthen the connection with the Roman past, the interior of the town hall was enriched by paintings depicting the city's Roman past. In addition, in 1670 a dozen ancient tombstones were brought to the town hall, where they were displayed as gallery of honour of the city's (alleged) great ancestors (Smetius 1784, 204). As a matter of fact, the tombstone of Caius Julius Pudens from the St. Nicholas chapel on the Valkhof was among them. After all, the chapel was considered his mausoleum, and anyone given such a monumental tomb must have been a very distinguished and heroic person, the reasoning went.

To conclude

In the 16th and 17th centuries, occasionally cities along the former Roman border liked to make use of their (real or imagined) ancient origins as a limes *castellum*, as a legionary town or as a Roman city. This connection to the past could be expressed in the urban space in various ways: with a simple memorial stone, with statues and fountains, with the

decoration of public buildings or even with the construction of a new *all'antica* town hall. Historical and scholarly interest was only one of the motivations to explore that distant past. Local patriotism and attempts to increase the city's fame, were certainly important motives too. But for urban authorities, there was sometimes more than honour and prestige. In some German imperial cities, a provable historical alliance with the emperor could be an argument to parry territorial claims by intrusive neighbouring princes. In the Dutch Republic, by contrast, there was no such threat from outside. Here, the competition for city antiquity was linked to the mutual ranking in the Provincial States and thus directly to political influence in the national administration.

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