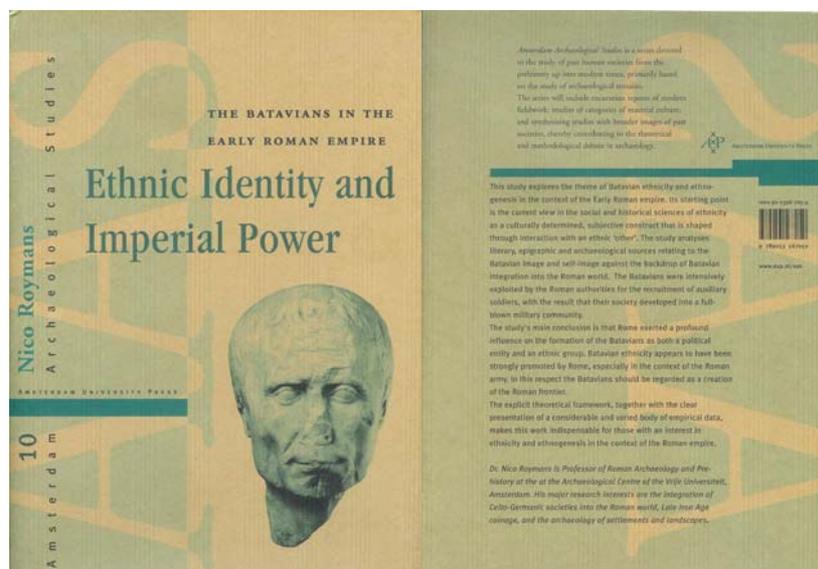


Roymans, N. 2004. Ethnic identity and imperial power. The Batavians in the Early Roman Empire. – Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press (Amsterdam Archaeological Studies)

Book review by H. van Enckevort



During his long career Nico Roymans has dedicated several publications to the Batavians, one of the more intriguing peoples who were living in the northwestern frontier zone of the Roman empire. His research culminates in this book, combining all the ideas, theories, and a lot of archaeological data from the heartland of the Batavians in the eastern part of the Dutch river area. The book deals with Batavian ethnicity and ethnogenesis in the context of the Early Roman Empire in the period before the Batavian Revolt in 69–70 AD. In the first chapter, he starts with the research aims, central concepts and perspectives of ethnicity in a broader context. In his view it is clear that the ethnicity of the Batavians was shaped through their interaction with the Romans, in particular through the exploitation of the Batavians for the recruitment of auxiliary soldiers.

In subsequent pages, Roymans alternates primarily historical chapters with chapters using archaeological and numismatic data. These data all relate to the image and self-image of the Batavians during the integration of the Batavians into the Roman empire. In summary the author reviews three main issues: the ethnogenesis of the Batavians, the ethnogenetic theory and the Batavians, and the transition of the Batavian people into a Roman *civitas*. Until recently the southern parts of the Netherlands were seen as part of those Germanic societies that had relatively egalitarian social structures. With the help of the hitherto ‘unknown’ rich sites and material (coins, glass bracelets, regional sanctuaries, a nucleated settlement) from the Batavian *civitas*, Roymans proves that this area has more similarities with the Celtic *oppida* world.

The numismatic evidence shows clearly that within a few decades, a ‘Batavian’ identity group emerged from multi-ethnic origins, remnants of the indigenous, pre-Caesarian people of the Eburones and post-Caesarian colonists of the Chatti, living in Hessen, Germany. Roymans presents in two chapters a vast amount of information about the gold triskeles coinages of the Eburones and the Lower Rhine *triquetrum* coinages which were associated with the formation of the Batavian polity. The latter coins should be seen as payment “by tribal leaders to form and maintain clientship networks, in particular to establish *comitatus* or loyal bands of horsemen” (p. 12).

Dredge finds in the river area in the neighbourhood of the modern villages of Kessel en Lith along the river Meuse suggest that this was a place where we should seek the most important, nucleated Batavian settlement before the arrival of the Roman general Drusus in Nijmegen in 12 AD. Looking to the functions this settlement had for the Batavian people, it is clear that it had the position as an *oppidum* for the Celtic people. Roymans successively describes, among other finds, swords, belt-hooks, *fibulae*, cauldrons and human bones. They all indicate the presence of a large settlement in which a cult place had a prominent position. The author is almost certain that in most of the important Batavian cult places, Hercules Magusanus was worshipped as the principal god.

The *civitates* in Caesar’s times “should be seen as loosely structured, fluid confederations of smaller ethnic groups” (p. 19). After the Roman troops arrived in the Dutch river area, the political and institutional structure of the *civitas Batavorum* changed drastically. The author makes clear that the Batavians underwent a social process to a more complex society, with a more highly developed hierarchy, and the first urbanised settlement in the

Netherlands. The central place of the Batavians near Kessel/Lith lost its function as the capital of the Batavians. Shortly after 10 BC. the Romans founded a new capital on the higher sandy soils of Nijmegen, with the historically known name *Oppidum Batavorum*. Two public stone sculptures found in Nijmegen express both the alliance with Rome and the position of *Oppidum Batavorum* within the Batavian *civitas*: the Tiberius column and the marble head of Julius Caesar.

The Dutch eastern river area, the heartland of the later *civitas Batavorum*, is the laboratory for Roymans to study the ethnogenesis and cultural transformation of the Batavian people, from the second century BC to the Flavian period. An important omission in his book is that he tells us nothing about the relation between this heartland in the river clay area and the region of the sandy soils in the southern parts of The Netherlands. In figure 8.4 (p. 206) he shows that also the northern area of the sandy soils are part of the *civitas Batavorum*. In figure 11.1 (p. 238) he indicates in a reconstruction of the *civitates* (with the help of the so-called Thiessen polygons in The Netherlands) that the more southern sandy soils also belong to the *civitas Batavorum*. For the coming years, the challenge will be to try to define the borders of the *civitas Batavorum* with the help of finds, especially the handmade pottery. In this respect, it is important that Roymans establishes that “a major methodological problem in this study is the absence of a sophisticated typo-chronological framework for archaeological data, (...) due to absence of depositing objects in graves, (...) [providing one] is a research priority for the near future (p. 10–11).”

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Drs. Drs. Harry van Enckevort
Gemeente Nijmegen
Bureau Archeologie
Postbus 9105
NL–6500 HG Nijmegen
tel: +31 (0)24–3293085
fax: +31 (0)24–3293084
e-mail: h.van.enckevort@nijmegen.nl