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Rurale gemeenschappen in de Civitas Cananefatium 50-300 na Christus

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Summary

This study is about the rural community of the Cananefates, a community that lived in the most northwestern, continental part of the Roman Empire during the period 50-300 AD. To study this community, a wide range of archaeological data was used, that was collected during excavations in the research area, which roughly corresponds to the civitas of the Cananefates. This civitas was located between the Lower Rhine and the river Meuse in the present day province of South-Holland, the Netherlands. The main research question focused on how the identity of the Cananefatian community was formed and how it changed over time. Since it can be assumed that the identity of all rural groups within the Roman Empire developed under the influence of Rome, another objective aimed to explore the role of the Roman state in the process of identity formation of the Cananefatian group. The final issue to be approached is the question whether the Cananefatian case study can be applied to other rural communities along the borders of the Roman Empire.

Evidence concerning the formation of the community of the Cananefates before the middle of the first century AD is known only from historical sources, which are difficult to interpret. Therefore, the reconstruction of the early history of the Cananefates remains to be hypothetical. The fact that the written sources report the existence of a population called Cananefates long before the archaeological evidence mentions a Cananefatian community, indicates that the name of the group is Roman in origin. On the basis of the archaeological evidence, the study area was populated by immigrant groups between 50 and 100 AD, while the earliest Roman forts along the Rhine were constructed in 39/40 AD. The distribution of certain categories of material culture suggests that the immigrants came from the western coast of the Netherlands, with a focus on the area north of the Rhine. There are also indications for a relationship with the Roman army, although these are more in evidence in the vicinity of the Rhine estuary as compared to other parts of the research area. Thus a diverse group of people settled in the area more or less at the same time as, or with the permission of, the Roman army.

Soon after the founding of the first settlements, a uniform (material) culture develops, in which not only consistency in the arrangement of the homestead, traditions of house building

and handmade pottery, but also similar patterns in food production and consumption are archaeologically observable elements. Such elements can be seen as the archaeological record of a set of symbols, with which the Cananefatian community shaped their group identity during the occupation of the research area. These symbols also distinguished them from other groups in the area, including the military communities along the Rhine or the (later) proto-urban community in Voorburg, although the latter initially had a rural background. The absence of monumental tombs and other interventions in the landscape, emphasise the lack of an explicit claim over the land by the local groups. No elite that could be considered as a carrier of a Cananefatian ethnic identity is archaeologically attestable. Despite the fact that the ritual focus was on the individual homestead, the similarities in the archaeological material show a strong bond between the rural communities and a series of shared ritual repertoires and ideas about how to live. The reason for the creation of this unified community may lie in the fact that it was deemed necessary by the presence of another, external and dominant factor (i.e. the Roman army), that accelerated the articulation of a specific, communal group identity. Although the primary engine for the development of the uniform rural culture in the *civitas* Cananefatium may have been the military, mechanisms such as the exchange of marriage partners, the small distances between settlements, exchange networks and other occasions in which people gathered may have formed the concrete grounds for the formation of a fairly homogeneous culture. Furthermore, there appears to be a rural society which is built up of relatively autonomous local units or groups that interact intensively with each other. However, there are few traces of communal activities. What they share is a set of practices and beliefs, but these do not seem to be imposed by an elite group.

Around the middle of the second century the Roman government invested in the construction of a road in the area. At the same time, it is likely that the settlement in Voorburg was raised to *municipium* and that the surrounding area was parceled, with the aim of recording the local groups and levying taxes. These measures take place in the context of an administrative reorganization and a (deliberate?) attempt at a further integration of rural communities in the Roman Empire. These actions lead to significant changes in the countryside. For example, the stable space – and hence the size of the individual farms – increases, while on some settlements large storage buildings appear, where crop yields could be collected in the benefit of the *annona*. On the rural settlements, handmade pottery disappears in favor of imported, wheel thrown vessels. Also the first monumental burial mounds appear in the area, through which the local community imposes a clear claim on the land. However, the byre house remains in most settlements. The short period in which these changes occur and the fact that handmade pottery disappears from all settlements in the area, points to a strongly connected rural community. Thus in the communal response to these changes, the community of the Cananefates remains clearly recognizable, as it does by sticking to the tradition of the byre house and the (renewed?) claim on the land.

In the beginning of the third century the byre house disappears and, increasingly, half-timbered buildings are constructed. Also buildings with stone foundations appear. The pottery assemblages of rural settlements from the study area are comparable to other regions of *Germania inferior*, indicating the growing empowerment of the rural communities in the province, forming an identity that transcends the region. This process is likely driven by increased exchanges through expanding trade and transport, which leads to increasing wealth in the northwestern provinces of the Roman Empire. Never the less, despite the emergence of a provincial group identity, in AD 250 milestones in The Hague and Rijswijk are erected in the name of the Cananefates. These milestones indicate that within the larger provincial identity, the articulation of a local, Cananefatian identity was still important. Thus although the Cananefatian community has been largely integrated in the broader provincial society by the third century, the individual, local group identity is maintained. The habitation on the rural settlements disappears around 300, perhaps as a result of a deliberate population policy from the Roman government. As a result, the community of Cananefates vanishes. In (the course of) the first half of the fourth century, several deserted settlements are visited by groups with a cultural background in the coastal area north of the Rhine. However, it is clear that this is a new group of people, meaning that continuity with the preceding habitation cannot be proven. Between 350 and 450 AD, evidence for habitation is absent in the research area.

Essentially, like many other rural groups along Rome's Frontiers, the community of the Cananefates came into being through Roman initiatives. This goes not only for the name of the community but also for the ability of people to settle in the research area under Roman military control. It may be concluded that an evolving Cananefatian group identity was mirrored on a Roman reference framework, perhaps even a Roman military reference framework. However, this does not exclude the creation of another dynamic with regard to group identity through increased internal exchange (like the exchange of marital partners and other ceremonial gatherings and ritual repertoires outside the army). The development of a specific set of symbols and shared ideas on dealing with the material world as well as the communal changes that took place within the community, point to independent agency, but always linked to wider socio-political and military developments within the Roman Empire. Despite the increasing integration in provincial society a Cananefatian group identity was maintained. Furthermore, the Cananefatian group shared their 'own' *civitas* with military and urban communities. However, despite the proximity of these groups, until the third century clear differences can be observed between the different groups, which can be said to be living apart together. Remarkably, existing scientific models used to study rural communities along Rome's frontiers, could not be applied in the Cananefatian case study. This, however, can be assumed for other border regions of the Roman Empire as well: they all followed their own trajectory and therefore they have to be studied individually. Furthermore, researching these 'marginal border areas', based on carefully collected archaeological data, can eventually provide the building blocks to actually understanding the functioning of Roman society in frontier areas.

