

About Meat and Blood....

Gallo-Roman Peasants and Soldiers in Northern Flanders



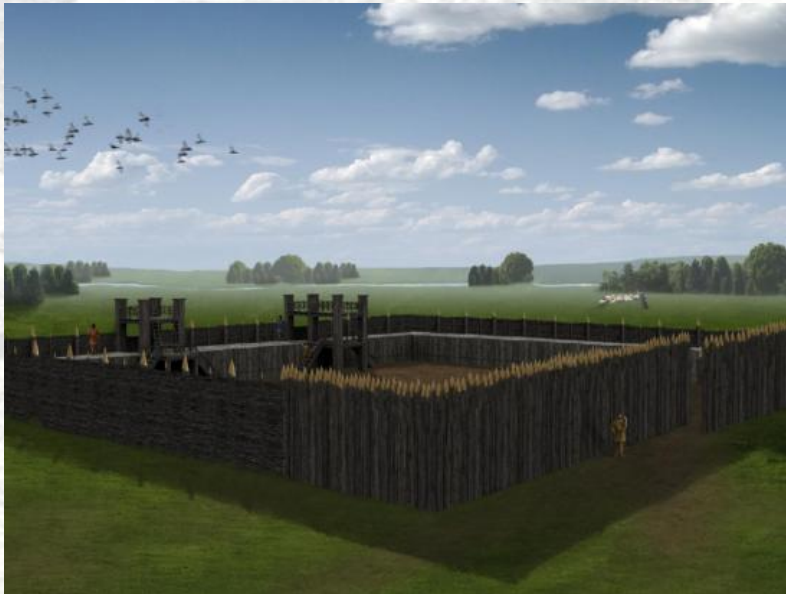
From December 3rd 2011 till June 15th 2012 the Provincial Archaeological Museum of Velzeke launches the illuminating exhibition “About Meat and Blood : Gallo-Roman Peasants and Soldiers in Northern Flanders”. This museum event, organised together with the Department of Archaeology of the Ghent University, casts a new and revealing light on the history and development of Roman life in the north Menapian region.

Situated at the fringes of the Roman Empire (“*..et extrema Galliarum..*”) this area was hitherto supposed to be poor and sparsely populated. Large-scale excavations of the past 15 years however have unveiled a completely different picture: peasant communities were thriving along the coast and in the hinterland living in dispersed farmsteads or compounds. The relative lack of Romanization and the absence of a villa economy suggest that a strong pre-Roman way of life was maintained during the first two centuries of Roman imperial rule.



The rural landscape was characterized by pastoral land use, combined with some arable cultivation. Contemporary written sources mention pig breeding and salt extraction as major factors in the rural economy: Menapian salted ham was a sought-after delicacy renowned all over the Empire. The Velzeke exhibition takes visitors through the world of the Menapian farmer, showcasing numerous objects which inform them about architecture, domestic rituals, funerary practices and daily life of nearly 2000 years ago.

The second large section of the exhibition displays objects, plans and reconstruction drawings related to the military and disruptive events which affected this border area of the Empire. From the late 2nd century onwards raids by Germanic marauders destabilized the North Gaulish coastal region and Roman military involvement became very apparent in northern Menapia. A variety of archaeological finds from the fortifications of Maldegem, Oudenburg, Aardenburg and Aalter bear witness to this dramatic ending of the *Pax Romana*'s former relative security.



In the following decades the Menapian countryside became entangled in a prolonged series of rural and military revolts. This growing insecurity instigated a process of rural decline during which farmsteads became abandoned. On show will be silver coins issued by the only historically known Menapian citizen, Carausius (“...*Menapiae civis*...”): for a short period this successful Roman military commander usurped imperial power but his forces were beaten by Constantius Chlorus. This emperor repopulated the devastated north Gaulish countryside with Germanic immigrants : some remarkable archaeological finds from Zele illustrate the settlement of Frisians in the northern Menapian during the late 3rd century. They are displayed in the Velzeke exhibition.

The name of the Menapians re-emerges well into the fourth century to designate a late Roman army unit, the *milites Menapii*. Stationed in the upper Rhine region these soldiers were involved in (re)constructing and defending this strategic strip of the Limes. For the first time since its discovery, epigraphic evidence of these “Menapian” soldiers is presented in Velzeke to the wide public.

