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The Roman Limes

Published by

Slings, Hubert and Frits van Oostrom.

A Key to Dutch History: The Cultural Canon of the Netherlands.

Amsterdam University Press, 2007.

Project MUSE. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76693>.



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[136.0.111.243] Project MUSE (2025-01-19 00:54 GMT)



47 AD - circa 400 AD

The Roman Limes

On the frontiers of the Roman world

Two thousand years ago, one of the frontiers of the immense Roman Empire ran through the Low Countries. The River Rhine that flowed from Nijmegen via Utrecht and Alphen aan den Rijn to the sea at Katwijk, formed part of the Roman *Limes*, the Latin word for frontier. In the eyes of the Romans, the uncivilised world began north of the river. That was where Germanic and Celtic tribes lived, including the Frisians and the Canninefates. The Rhine was, however, not just a frontier. It was also a major transport channel for the Romans. Supplies were brought in and exported by ship.

The Romans built watchtowers and army camps at regular intervals along the Rhine to defend their territory against enemy attacks from the north. Most of the encampments could house several hundred soldiers, but close to Nijmegen a camp arose that could accommodate two legions of six thousand men. The presence of these well-trained soldiers in their tunics, with their shiny

helmets, shields and swords, must have made quite an impression on the local population. Moreover, the surrounding areas changed dramatically with the introduction of Roman architecture.

South of the frontier – in Roman territory – lived, among others, the Batavians. They lived in peace with the Romans and many Batavians served in the Roman army. However, in 69 A.D. they rose up against the Romans, profiting from the unrest that had broken out across the entire Roman Empire following the death of the Emperor Nero. The Batavians were led by Julius Civilis, a Batavian who had already served twenty-five years in the Roman army. For a short time it seemed as if the rebellion would be successful, but after a few months the Romans defeated the Batavians. Julius Civilis had achieved nothing. Nonetheless, he was honoured as a true hero centuries later. Sixteenth century scholars claimed that the Batavians had rebelled for love of freedom

and that they should therefore be regarded as the true forefathers of the Dutch. This says more about the scholars than it does about the Batavians.

In the fourth century AD, more and more Germanic tribes invaded Roman territory. As a result, the Romans ultimately withdrew to behind the Alps.

Various places along the Rhine in the Netherlands have their origins in Roman times, as you can see on a medieval copy of an ancient Roman map. Finds are still being made at new archaeological excavations. For example, a watchtower and two ships were unearthed when the new Leidsche Rijn district was being built near Utrecht.



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Sub-topics

Primary education sector

The conquests of Julius Caesar
Nijmegen in Roman times
The river as a frontier and transport channel

Secondary education sector

The Batavian rebellion
Trade and cities in Roman times
Frontier cultures: the confrontation between the
Germanic and Roman cultures
Roman writers on the Germanic tribes
How the Roman Empire was organised

Past and Present

Roman remains in the Netherlands
Archaeology in the Netherlands
Are there similarities between ancient Rome and
the modern United States as a super power?

In the Treasure Chest

Roman helmet

References

Places to Go

Alphen aan den Rijn: Archeon
Nijmegen: Valkhof Museum
Xanten: "Römerroute"
Lelystad: Batavia Shipyard, where a Roman ship
discovered at Leidsche Rijn is on show

Books for young people

Thijs Goverde, *Het bloed van de verraders* (9+)
Martine Letterie, *Het jaar van de Bataafse opstand* (9+)
Jan Ploeger, *Het lage huis* (12+)

Background literature

Hans Teitler, *De opstand der "Batavieren"*,
(Verloren Verleden 1), Hilversum 1998.
Bernard Colenbrander (ed.), *Limes Atlas*, Rotterdam
2005.

Websites

www.limes.nl
www.cultuurwijzer.nl/cultuurwijzer.nl/i000437.html (medieval copy of a map of the
Roman world at the time of Emperor Augustus)
www.museumvalkhof.nl/index2.html
(computer animation of the headquarters of
the Roman army encampment near Nijmegen)
www.roemerroute.de
www.belvedere.nu
www.archfonds.nl