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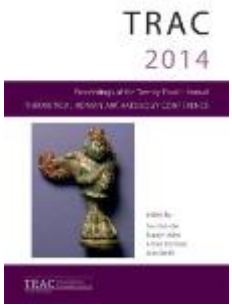

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Caesar in Gaul: New Perspectives on the Archaeology of Mass Violence

Nico Roymans and Manuel Fernández-Götz

Introduction

This paper aims to introduce a new research project on the Roman conquest of Northern Gaul. In these districts, especially in the 'Germanic' frontier zone, the conquest had dramatic negative effects; the emphasis was on destruction, mass enslavement, deportation and probably even genocide. This more negative aspect of the Roman conquest has been the subject of little serious research. Until recently, this was not possible because of the lack of independent archaeological data for such research. However, the situation has changed substantially in the last two decades. Thanks to new archaeological, palaeobotanical and numismatic evidence, it is now possible to develop a more accurate picture of the conquest and its social and cultural impact on indigenous societies, as well as of Caesar's narrative itself. Adopting a theoretical-methodological focus, this paper aims to show how archaeology can contribute to the study of mass violence and disruption by using a combination of archaeological and historical information. Whereas the relatively new domain of battlefield archaeology will be addressed through the analysis of the fortification of Thuin and its environment, the alleged genocide of the Eburones by Caesar will be revised on the basis of settlement patterns and environmental data.

Re-addressing the Roman conquest of Northern Gaul

In the years 58–51 B.C. Gaul was conquered and added to the Roman state. For the first time in history tribal groups in North-western Europe were confronted with the violent expansion of an empire (Badian 1968) (Fig. 1). Although it is generally accepted that Caesar's war narrative is imbued with personal propaganda and the rhetoric of an imperial ideology (Riggsby 2006; Schadee 2008; Kraus 2009), there is no doubt that the conquest had dramatic consequences for Gallic societies. Illustrative is Appian's claim (*Gallic History* 2) that Caesar killed one million Gauls and enslaved another million out of a total population of four million.

Until recently the Roman conquest by Caesar was only documented historically in the northern periphery of Gaul. In the Netherlands, Belgium and the German Lower Rhine area the Caesarian conquest was almost totally intangible in the archaeological record; direct archaeological evidence in the form of Roman army camps or battlefields was absent, this in contrast to the more central and southern areas of Gaul (e.g. Alesia, see Reddé 2003; Poux 2008). One reason for this was the scarcity in the North of heavily defended oppida (Roymans 1990; Fernández-Götz 2014), which could have been used by Caesar as military targets or as winter camps for his army.

The shortage of archaeological evidence for the conquest does not mean, however, that there

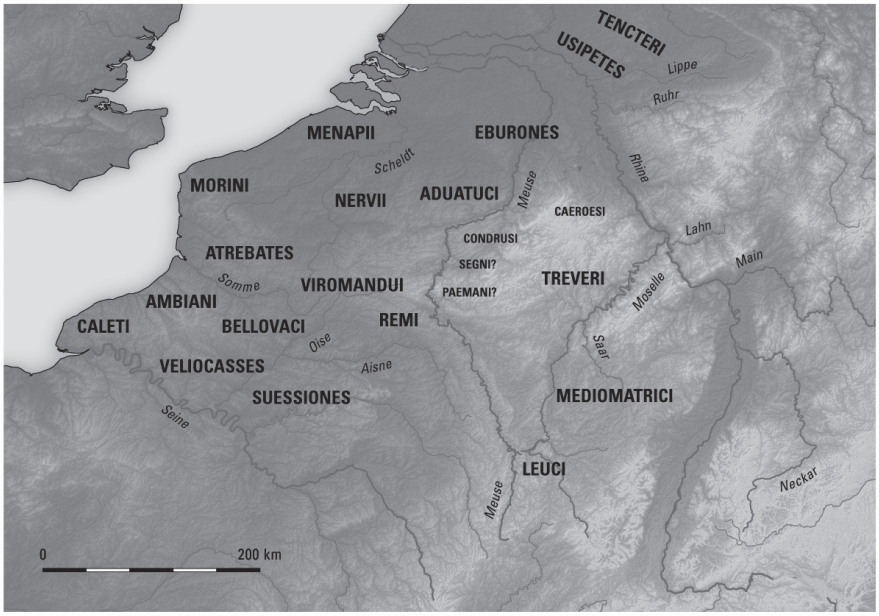

Figure 1: Ethnic map of Northern Gaul at the time of Caesar (after Fernández-Götz 2014)

were almost no consequences for the societies in this northern periphery. On the contrary, there is probably no region in Gaul where the impact of the Roman conquest was as dramatic as in the Germanic frontier zone (Roymans 2004). In the north-eastern districts of Gaul, the conquest had profound negative effects on the lives of tens of thousands of people: the emphasis was on destruction, mass enslavement, deportation and even genocide. Here, Roman imperialism revealed itself in its most aggressive form.

These more negative aspects of the Roman conquest have been the subject of little serious research by archaeologists. Until recently, this was not possible because of the lack of independent archaeological data for such investigations in Northern Gaul. Moreover, there are a number of additional factors of a more general nature that have also contributed to this research gap: 1) mass violence is a complex phenomenon that cannot simply be 'excavated'; 2) archaeological data usually have a limited chronological resolution that make the analysis on the time-scale of the *histoire évenementielle* problematic; and 3) over recent decades, much of the emphasis has been on regional archaeological projects focusing on long-term economic, social and cultural transformations. All in all, there has been an underestimation of the direct consequences of the Roman conquest, sometimes leading to the bizarre conclusion that Caesar's conquest had limited societal impact because there was no archaeological evidence for it, as reflected in the title of Hamilton's paper 'Was there ever a Roman conquest?' (1995).

However, this situation is now changing, again due to several factors: 1) the increased attention to agency and the role of the individual (Dobres and Robb 2000; Gardner 2008), which stimulates historical-archaeological research; 2) the rapid development of battlefield archaeology and forensic archaeology (Hunter and Cox 2005; Saunders 2012), resulting in a growing interest in the topic of mass violence; 3) the impact of the post-colonial research agenda (Lydon and Rizvi 2010), which has led to a greater awareness of the destructive aspects of Roman imperialist

expansion; 4) the increased quantity and quality of archaeological data obtained over the past two decades (Roymans 2004; Uelsberg 2007; Fernández-Götz 2014); and 5) the introduction by classicists and ancient historians of new methods for the critical analysis of ancient war narratives (e.g. discourse analysis, narratology, see de Jong 2014).

The substantial increase in archaeological, palaeobotanical and numismatic evidence and the development of new approaches and questions can be used to obtain a more balanced picture of the conquest and its social and cultural impact on native societies, as well as of Caesar's war narrative itself. In 2014 the authors initiated a new research project entitled 'Imperialism, mass violence and integration. Re-assessing the Caesarian conquest of Northern Gaul', in order to explore the direct impact of the conquest on indigenous societies. The main aims of the project can be summarised in three points: 1) the study of the direct effects of Caesar's Gallic Wars on the societies of Northern Gaul; 2) to provide new theoretical and methodological insights into the archaeology of mass violence and genocide; and 3) to explore the potentials of an integrated archaeological, historical and narratological approach to Caesar's war account.

Towards an archaeology of mass violence and genocide

Whilst there are other aspects, a major theme of this research proposal is the use of mass violence in Roman imperialist expansion. Within this field we have a special interest in a particular form of mass violence that can be indicated as genocide. This concept can be used when the violence is linked to an explicit intention of the dominant power to destroy an ethnic group or people (cf. Bloxham and Moses 2010; Jones 2013). Caesar is very clear about the aim of his campaigns against, for example, the Eburones; the campaigns were meant to annihilate this people and its name (*stirps ac nomen civitatis tollatur*; *B Gall.* 6.34.8), which testifies to his awareness of genocidal practices. The strategy repeatedly described by Caesar to travel with his army through the homeland of enemy tribes with the aim to burn down as many settlements as possible, to destroy the crops in the fields and to murder the inhabitants, must have had a dramatic impact on the physical appearance of the homeland of these populations; in fact their lands were transformed into 'landscapes of war and terror' (cf. Hill and Wileman 2002) (Fig. 2).

Historians have made an important contribution to the genocide debate by informing us about the great time depth of genocidal practices, the varying historical contexts in which they occurred, and the different ways in which mass destruction was realised (for the Ancient World, see Van Wees 2010). Archaeology can contribute by testing potential cases of genocide that are historically documented. What the above means for us is that we should try to obtain the best possible picture of the concrete behaviour of the Roman army in Gaul on the one hand, and the moral and juridical justification for extreme acts of violent aggression on the other.

With this programme we also aim to develop a methodology to show how archaeology can contribute to the study of mass violence and disruption in pre-modern empires by using a combination of historical and archaeological data. Thus far there has been no systematic approach to the 'archaeology of genocide' in pre-modern societies. The programme is therefore of a pioneering nature, occupying the front line of a new field of study that has great potential. From an archaeological perspective, mass violence and destruction can result in:

1) Evidence for massacre deposits or other conflict-associated mortuary practices. This evidence is important (Komar 2008), but also problematic as it is often difficult to make inferences about the scale of the use of violence. It may have been linked to local conflicts between groups that have nothing to do with genocide.

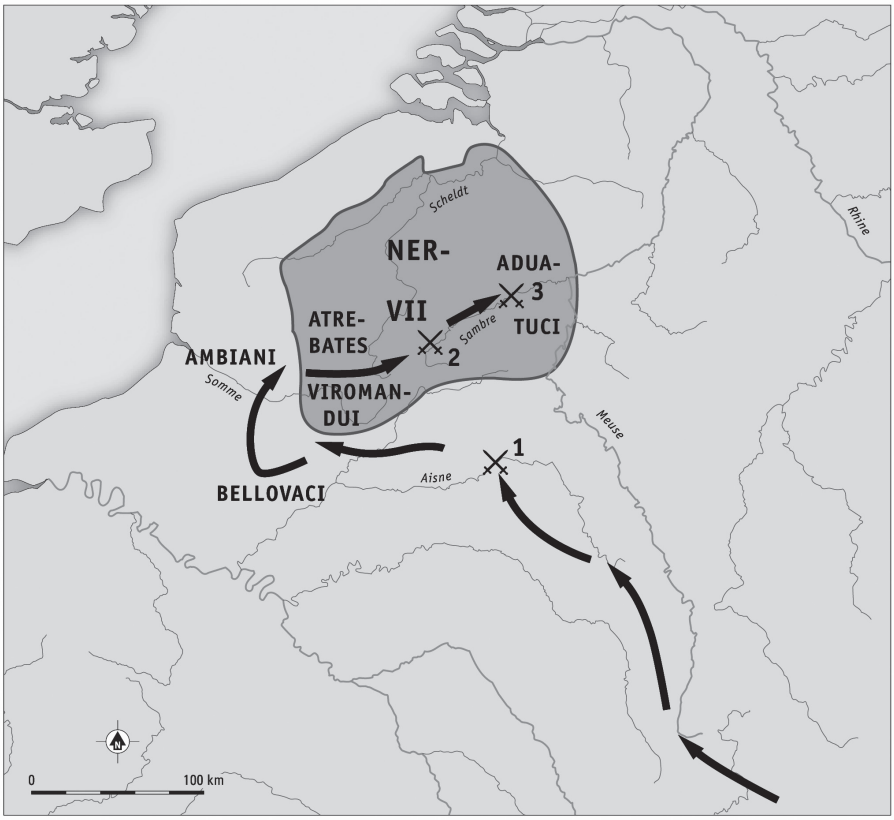

Figure 2: Caesar's military campaigns of 57 B.C. and the approximate locations of major battlefields. 1) along the river Aisne; 2) along the river Sabis/Sambre; 3) siege of the oppidum of the Aduatuci (after Roymans et al. 2012)

2) The evidence produced by landscape archaeology and settlement archaeology has much greater potential. Starting from the assumption that the direct consequence of genocide is a sudden decline in a region's population density, the settlement evidence can be used to explore the question as to whether large-scale discontinuity can be observed in the habitation history. However, the large-scale depopulation of a region is not in itself an argument for mass destruction, as a group may have migrated to another region without losing its identity. But if we have a historically documented case of the annihilation of an ethnic group, the study of discontinuity in the settlement evidence represents an important archaeological test case. A precondition is of course the presence of a substantial body of high-quality settlement data in combination with a well-developed chronological framework.
3) An indirect effect of the partial or complete depopulation of a region following mass destruction is that after a certain time the region is repopulated again by immigrant groups. These latter might have a distinct material culture that is reflected in the archaeological record (e.g. house types, pottery, grave rituals, ornaments).

In his war narrative Caesar describes two different ways of annihilating a tribal group. In the case of the Aduatuci the community was defeated and enslaved en masse after the conquest of a single fortification where the entire community had assembled (*B Gall.* 2.33). In the case

of the Eburones the population was completely dispersed over the region when attacked by an armed force of six legions that ravaged the countryside and slaughtered the population (*B Gall.* 6.34). It is clear that the archaeological record of these two types of destruction will be quite different. In what follows we are going to present new evidence that helps to shed some light on both scenarios.

Thuin as a 'crime scene'

One of the more spectacular discoveries of Roman provincial archaeology of the last few years is the plausible identification of a Late Iron Age fortification at Thuin (Belgium) as the *oppidum* of the Aduatuci, conquered by Caesar in 57 B.C. (see also Roymans *et al.* 2012: 20–24). For the first time in Northern Gaul, archaeology can directly trace one of the major 'crime scenes' described by the Roman proconsul.

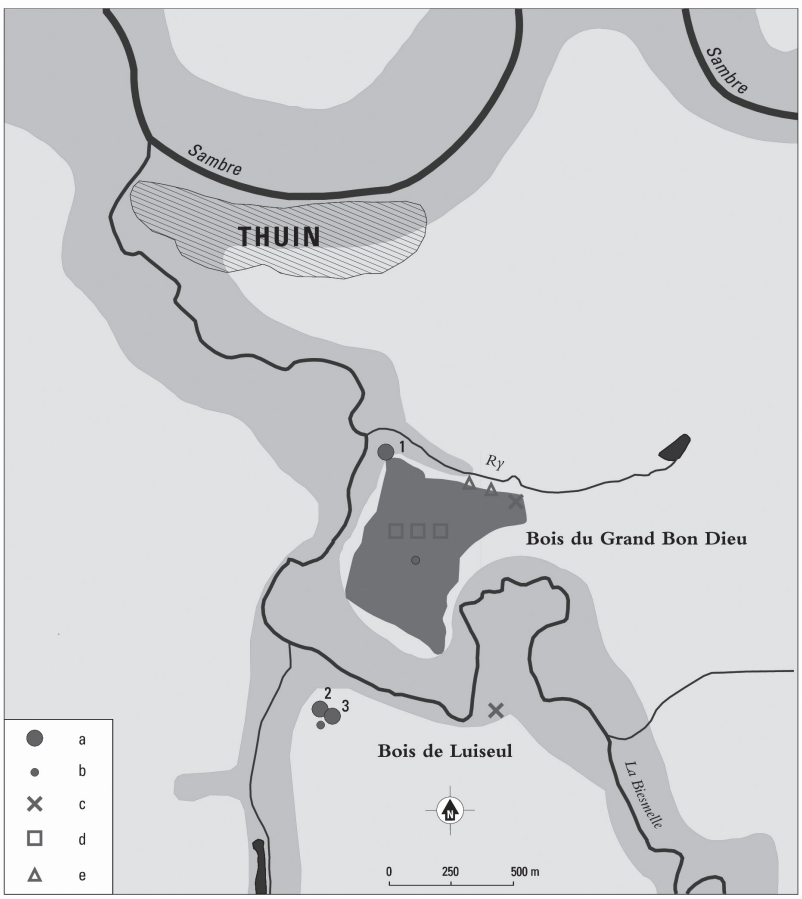

Figure 3: Topography of the Late Iron Age fortification at Thuin and the location of gold finds and Roman lead sling bullets. a) gold hoard; b) isolated gold coin(s); c) concentration of sling bullets; d) iron tools; e) bronze ornaments and appliqués (after Roymans et al. 2012)

The *éperon barrée*-type fortification of Thuin occupies a plateau of more than 13 ha and can be reached on the eastern side via a narrow, 60 m wide finger of land (Fig. 3). An important clue is provided by a radiocarbon date for charcoal from the rampart, which gives a date between 90 B.C. and 60 A.D. A date in the last centuries B.C. is confirmed by the find of Late Iron Age metal objects, including iron tools, bronze ornaments and appliqués, and a gold coin of the Eburones. There are no finds at all from the first two centuries A.D., from which we may conclude that the settlement definitely did not survive into Roman times. We do not know whether the fortification was permanently inhabited in the late La Tène period, or whether it was only used on an incidental basis in times of crisis. In any case, three gold hoards, several stray gold coins and the terminal of a gold torque have been found in or immediately outside the fortification. As new research has shown, the gold depositions at Thuin belong to the older phase of the Fraire/Amby horizon, which certainly pre-dates the Eburonean revolt of 54–53 B.C. and gives an important chronological clue for the dating of the site (Roymans *et al.* 2012) (Fig. 4).

Several elements suggest that this was the *oppidum* of the Aduatuci conquered by Caesar. According to written information, this site was seized by the Romans in 57 B.C., after which its entire population of 53,000 individuals were sold as slaves and deported to Italy: 'Then Caesar sold as one lot the booty of the town. The purchasers furnished a return to him of 53,000 persons' (Caesar, *B Gall.* 2.33).

The main arguments for the identification of Thuin as the scene of the crime can be summarised as follows: 1) the fact that this was an important Late Iron Age fortification which was situated in the territory of the Aduatuci and that did not survive into Roman times; 2) the match with the topography described by Caesar; 3) the dating of the gold hoards in the early 50s B.C., which seems to reflect a single event; 4) and finally, and very importantly, the concentrations of Roman lead sling bullets which indicate a siege by the Roman army. The sling bullets appeared in two separate concentrations: on the wall near the main entrance of the fortification and on the other side of the Biesmelle river near the Bois de Luiseul. Their concentration at the main rampart suggests that they were used by the attacking side. Moreover, the distribution of these projectiles

Figure 4: One of the hoards of Nervian gold coins from the mid-1st century B.C. found at Thuin and probably related to the Caesarian campaign against the Nervii and Aduatuci in 57 B.C. (after Roymans et al. 2012)

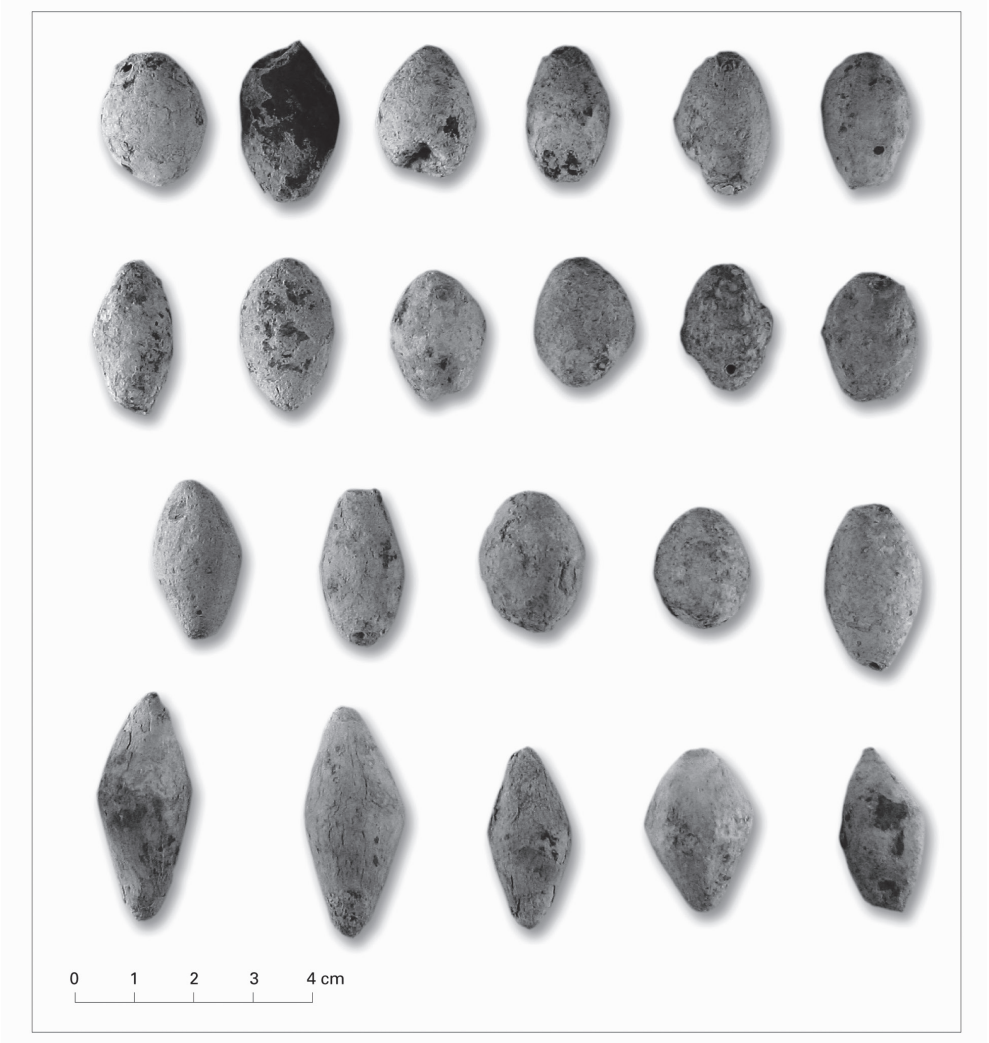

Figure 5: Roman lead sling bullets from the Late Iron Age fortification at Thuin (after Roymans et al. 2012)

suggests that the Roman attacks focused on the principal rampart and on another target across the Biesmelle river near the Bois de Luiseul which cannot be identified more closely (Fig. 5).

The coin depositions in the Bois de Luiseul can best be interpreted as portable wealth hidden at a cult place at a time of crisis. Following the capture of the *oppidum*, not only will the entire population have been sold as slaves, but the Roman army will have systematically plundered the fortification. Caesar will have been chiefly interested in the portable wealth hidden there in the form of coins and jewellery. Only the three recently identified gold hoards of Thuin remained out of Roman hands, but these will have represented only a fraction of the gold that was seized there. Thus our hypothesis is that the mass deportation of the Aduatuci after the

fall of their *oppidum* meant that part of the portable wealth buried beforehand in the soil was never recovered, giving rise to an archaeological hoard horizon (cf. Roymans *et al*. 2012). In his biography of Caesar, Suetonius wrote that Caesar was guilty of the large-scale plunder of *oppida* and sanctuaries in Gaul and of enriching himself enormously with the wealth stored there, most notably in the form of gold: 'In Gaul he pillaged shrines and temples of the gods filled with offerings, and oftener sacked oppida for the sake of plunder than for any fault. In consequence he had more gold than he knew what to do with, and offered it for sale throughout Italy and the provinces at the rate of 3000 sesterces a pound' (Suetonius, *Iul.* 54, 2). Since the usual price of gold was 4000 *sestertii*, Caesar greatly inflated the Italian gold market. The *oppidum* of the Aduatuci which he conquered in 57 B.C. will have been an apposite example of this policy of the Roman proconsul.

Settlement patterns and the fate of the Eburones

Although it is clear that both the Eburones and the Aduatuci did not survive the conquest period as tribal groups, there are differing opinions among historians about the interpretation of Caesar's narrative; some scholars take his account on the destruction of the above tribes very literally, while others (e.g. Heinrichs 2008) see it as a rhetorical act of political propaganda. Information about the genocide of the Eburones goes back to Caesar himself, who says in his account that the territory of this *civitas* was razed to the ground and left to be pillaged as punishment for Ambiorix' rebellion of 54 B.C.: 'He [Caesar] sent messengers around to the neighbouring tribes and invited them all, in the hope of booty, to join him in pillaging the Eburones, [...] and at the same time, by surrounding it with a large host, destroy the race and name of the tribe [*stirps ac nomen civitatis tollatur*]' (Caesar, *B Gall.* 6.34.8).

After that the Eburones disappeared from the political map forever. Does this mean that all the members of this ethnic group were massacred? There are reasons to assume that their absence from the political map after the conquest was not necessarily due to complete genocide, but could be the result of a policy of *damnatio memoriae* by the Roman authorities. However, a substantial population decrease caused by the partial genocide of the members of this tribe seems likely. In fact, pollen diagrams seem to suggest a reduction of human activity and an increase in arboreal pollen in the Cologne hinterland around the mid-first century B.C. (Meurers-Balke and Kalis 2006; Kalis and Meurers-Balke 2007), a conclusion that seems to correlate fairly closely with the events described in the texts and which suggests that population declined significantly in this region, although it never became completely uninhabited (Joachim 1999–2000, 2007).

A substantial population decrease in the first century B.C. also seems to occur in the Meuse-Demer-Scheldt region (South Netherlands/North Belgium), which has produced high-quality settlement evidence (Roymans *et al.* 2015). It is often impossible to specify the date of abandonment of Late Iron Age settlements because of the low chronological resolution of the material culture. However, it is significant that most native-Roman settlements in this region appear to be new foundations from the late first century B.C./earliest first century A.D. There is increasing evidence that the first century B.C. was a period of habitation discontinuity in this area. Thus archaeology is able to show that there was a serious break in first century B.C. habitation in the Meuse-Demer-Scheldt region, which may well be related to the conquest period.

At the same time archaeology allows the image offered by the written sources to be refined, providing evidence of continuity that suggests the area inhabited by the Eburones was never completely depopulated. The most important arguments in support of some degree of continuity

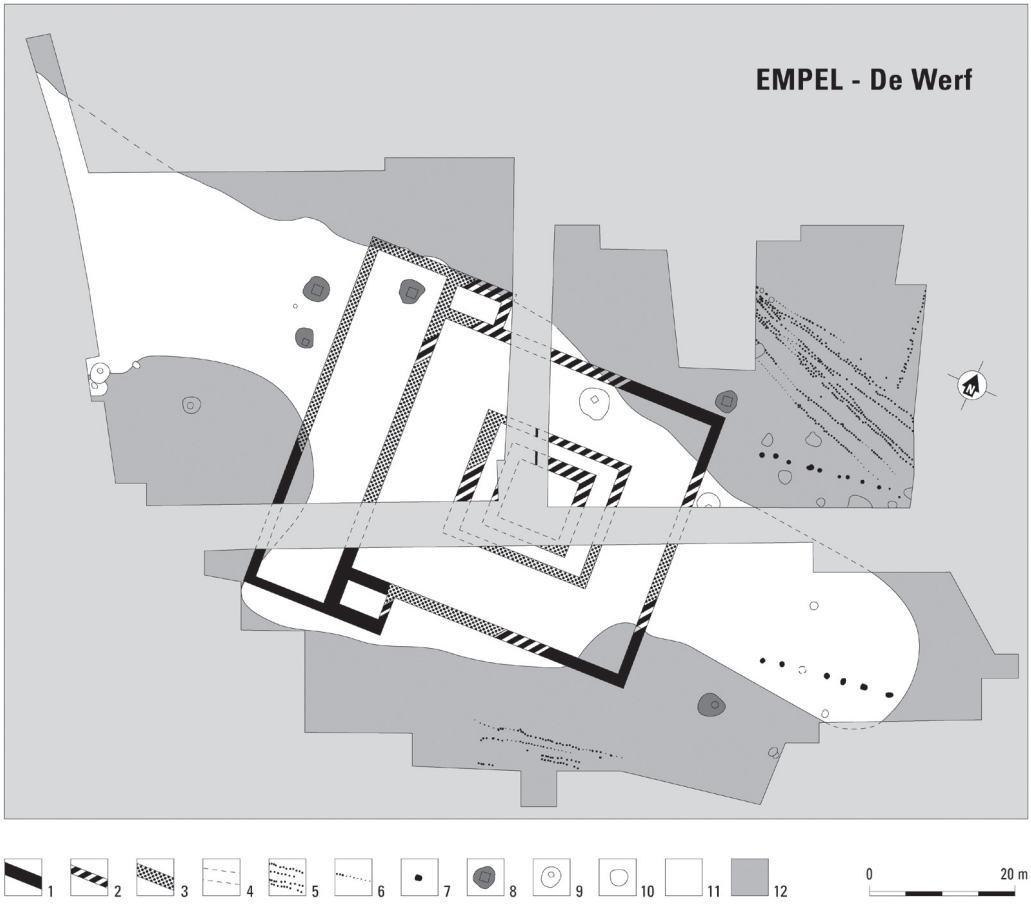

Figure 6: Simplified plan of the sanctuary of Empel. 1) foundations of Roman walls; 2) robber trenches of Roman walls; 3) reconstructed Roman walls; 4) ditto, not excavated; 5) picket fences; 6) ditto, reconstructed; 7) posthole; 8) Roman well; 9) medieval well; 10) pit; 11) pleistocene sand; 12) clay soil (after Roymans and Derks 1994)

include certain house types, and the recurrent use of cult places, since the pre-Roman sites of Kessel, Empel and Elst continued developing until they became monumental Gallo-Roman sanctuaries (Roymans and Derks 1994; Roymans 2004) (Fig. 6).

Winners and losers, conquest and integration

However much we may justly emphasise the continuity between the pre-Roman and Gallo-Roman periods, the agency of the local elites, their selective adoption of cultural innovations and their re-making of them to suit local conditions (cf. Roymans 1996), we should not forget that bringing Gaul under the rule of Rome was ultimately an imperialist act that brought with

it the death and loss of liberty of hundreds of thousands of people (Haffner and Krausse 2001). Aspects such as the partial genocide of the Eburones, the thousands who fell in battle, the massive sales of slaves through the southern markets, and the looting of numerous sanctuaries were acknowledged by the conquerors themselves in their writings, and modern scholars should not try to deny or soften their impact by using anachronistic euphemisms. Episodes of active resistance existed, and so did collaborators, integration and hybridization. A holistic history should include victors and vanquished, winners and losers, and of course also all those who cannot be easily assigned to one of these two poles, and who simply tried to survive and adapt as best they could to the changing world they lived in.

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