

## **Living on the edge. Transformation processes in the local communities of the *civitas Menapiorum*, 150BC-400AD**

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the transformation processes in the local communities of the *civitas Menapiorum* during their integration in the Roman Empire. During Roman times already, this area *in extrema galliarum* seems to have had a “marginal” character, when seen from a geographical or political angle. Indeed, landscapes and soils did not allow for a large-scale surplus production in cereals and the manifest absence of *villae* as centres of agricultural production, as well as other forms of material culture related to Mediterranean-style patterns of consumption and display of identity, have been considered by many scholars as signs of a “less-Romanised” society living on the edges of Gaul.

In this paper it is argued that the “marginal” character of the communities involved is a highly context- and time-dependent concept which needs adjustment and a more specific use. *Marginality* can also equal *opportunity* and rather than being totally concealed in marginality, it is therefore argued that these local communities economically interacted with Rome along the lines of the opportunities offered by the landscape, socially resulting in the transformation of a tribal towards a peasant-society. The ways in which the families expressed certain elements of identity in materially translated practices, remained to evolve according to existing categories, being expressed for a local context by local practices using local or imported “Roman-style”-material.

In the theoretical framework applied in this paper, Roman period “native” landscapes, (small) farms, houses and cemeteries as well as the related material culture are considered as arenas of social practice in which local groups appear as active agents, continuously interacting with and redefining the surrounding material and biological environment. However, the practices in which byre-houses were built, in which food had to be prepared and consumed and hence the common pottery had to be produced, also belonged to the discursive consciousness of common practice. They were embedded in the habitus or logic of common practice and hence resided in re-defining existing structured categories which often climb back in time for centuries and had become the material result of the equation between ecological and social parameters. With the integration into the Roman world, these structured categories became more challenged and exposed before being reintegrated, offering an insight into the transformation processes at work.

We should therefore aim to analyse those material correlates particularly rooted in common practice in order to understand the changes or not brought about by Rome in the society. By assessing possible landscape-based elements of social group identity such as the ways in which people build stable-houses and farms; the chaîne opératoire, styles and uses of their handmade pottery and the funeral traditions they practice, the previously as “less Romanised” considered rural territories of the northern part of the *civitas Menapiorum* offer a new, “bottom-up” and complex view on the processes of persistence and integration of peasant groups during Roman rule.

Attention is given to the long-term processes of change, putting emphasis on the diverse articulation of these processes in different regionally and landscape-based contexts and discourses. This kind of research should not be teleological; it should not aim for definite answers and revolutionary views. In my opinion it should rather bring to surface and assess the heterogeneity of the Empire and the complexity of the society at its rural base as well as the different processes of transformation at work during interaction with Rome.

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