

TOLSUM REVISITED: HOW THE FRISIAN OX DISAPPEARED

M.C. GALESTIN

University of Groningen, Groningen Institute of Archaeology, Groningen, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT: The wooden stylus tablet from Tolsum in Friesland, discovered in 1914, is well-known because of its text in Latin cursive writing which was long interpreted as a contract for the purchase of an ox. A re-transcription of the writing on the tablet in 2007 in Oxford with the aid of new techniques resulted in a completely revised text. It referred to a debt owed to a slave by someone whose name is not mentioned in this part of the text. Witnesses to this contract were Titus Cassius, tribune of the *Legio V*, a second slave, and a member of a Batavian army unit. The slaves were probably owned by a woman named Iulia Secunda, who was possibly the tribune's wife.

On the basis of this new transcription the tablet can now almost certainly be dated to AD 29, one year after the Frisian revolt. Still unsettled is the question whether this Roman contract really originated in a native settlement in Friesland, far from the Roman military settlements along the Rhine. The presence of early Roman objects in Winsum – only 6 km from Tolsum – that probably reflect Roman military presence there during the Augustan or Tiberian period, makes a local origin for the contract at least a possibility.

The Tolsum stylus tablet is the earliest handwritten text in northern Europe as well as the northernmost Latin text on the European continent. It provides us with information on the interaction between soldiers of different rank and of people connected to the Roman army during the winter of the year AD 29.

KEYWORDS: the Netherlands, Friesland, Tolsum, AD 29, stylus tablet, writing tablet, Frisians, ox-sale.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1914 a discovery was made in the course of soil removal activities on the *terp* 'Groot Tolsum' in the province of Friesland that has fascinated archaeologists, historians and legal experts for the past 100 years. It consisted of a Roman wooden stylus tablet that still showed traces of a Latin text. The cursive writing was scarcely legible but could nonetheless be deciphered. The text formed the remaining part of a contract concerning the sale of an ox for a price of 115 coins to a Roman individual – or so it seemed. The transaction became famous and was often referred to in subsequent publications, not only because of its contents but also because as a Roman contract found in Friesland, far north of the *limes*, it was unique. The text was transcribed and in 1917 published by the Groningen classicist C.W. Vollgraff, and his transcription and translation essentially remained unaltered until recently, although over the years several proposals were made for emendations of the legal expressions. In 1995 and 1998, for example, the legal historian E. Slob published a careful study in which he proposed changes in some of the legal phrases. Slob also ordered a Carbon 14 test in Groningen of the tablet's wood, since doubts had arisen about its authenticity. The tablet turned out to be certainly Roman and probably from the early Roman Imperial period, but a more precise date could not be obtained (Slob 1995, 1998). Other doubts centred around the tablet's context. A Frisian *terp*, far beyond the *limes*, seemed a most unlikely location for a Roman contract, and it was therefore suspected to have been re-deposited from an original location elsewhere.

All in all a thorough re-investigation of the tablet itself and a re-evaluation of the writing on it were called for. The writing was found to be still legible but requiring special expertise. The Dutch epigraphist K.A. Worp invited the British specialists in Latin cursive script, A.K. Bowman and R.E.O. Tomlin of Oxford University, to apply modern imaging techniques to the tablet in order to allow a detailed study of the writing on it. These techniques were highly successful and resulted in what amounts to a completely new transcription, which in turn led to a radically different reading of several parts in the text. One of the elements that proved to be incorrect was the supposed sale of the ox. It was now also possible to assign a precise date to the text, which turned out to have been written in the year AD 29.

This revised text and date raise new questions regarding our knowledge of the Frisian past. The fact that the Tolsum tablet is so far the oldest handwritten, coherent Latin text found in mainland Europe remains, however, uncontested.

2. THE TOLSUM TABLET

The writing tablet measures 1.7 x 13.8 cm at a thickness of 0.8 cm. Both sides display a c. 1 cm-wide band along the four edges, surrounding a slightly depressed rectangular area. This area was originally covered in wax. A c. 3 cm-wide vertical band on one side, the backside, was left free. All surfaces are black, since the wax had originally been mixed with soot (Vollgraff, 1917: 71). This wax coating has not yet been tested. Into one of the long hori-

zontal edges two holes had been drilled, and an indentation had been carved into the middle of the backside. Both sides of the tablet contain traces of writing with each side being the reverse of the other, so that the tablet had to be flipped over vertically in order to read the text. The tablet is made of wood from the European silver fir (*abies alba* or *abies pectinata*), a tree not native to Friesland but common in central Europe.

2.1. Writing tablets

Roman writing tablets or stylus tablets are also called wax tablets, which is how the Latin term for them, *tabula cerata*, translates literally, after the thin layer of wax that covered them and into which one could write. The stylus that was used for this could be made of bronze, ivory or bone and always had both a pointed and a flat tip. The point was used for writing and the flat tip for smoothening the wax when having to correct mistakes. Used tablets could be wiped clean and prepared for reuse by smoothening the entire wax surface. Wax tablets were frequently used for letters as well as for school exercises. The Tolsum tablet, however, contained a contract.

A Roman contract was often written on three connected tablets. Two of those, containing the actual contract, were tied together with a cord to which the witnesses' seal impressions were usually attached, so that the text could not be read without first breaking the seals (Speidel, 1996: 22, fig. 7; Meyer, 2004: 131, fig. 4). The third tablet contained the same text, but unsealed and therefore accessible to all who wished to do so. In case of a dispute the sealed part of the contract could be opened, for example in court, after which the original text could be consulted. The Tolsum tablet is probably the middle one of an original set of three (Galestin, 2009: 249, fig. 2). The writing on the front represents the second half of the contract, and that on the back contains the names of the witnesses. Since the first tablet is missing, the contents of the first part of the contract are unknown.

It is not likely that the Tolsum tablet was the third tablet of a triptych as Bowman, Tomlin & Worp (2009: 168) assume. According to this reconstruction the 'open text' "will have been written on the inner faces of tablets 1 and 2". However, in this reconstruction the seals would not be protected and the sealing string would pass across tablet 2, across one part of the 'open text'. Furthermore, the 'open text' does not necessarily need to have been on two 'pages'. The entire text could have been written on one face, with smaller letters compared to the letters of the sealed text (Galestin, 2009: fig. 3). This is seen on a triptych from a Roman archive discovered near Pompeii where on 'page' 5 the entire text of the preceding 'pages' 2 and 3 was written (Camodeca, 1999: 121–122, Nr. 45 and 527-532).

2.2. The Text: Latin Cursive

The wax layer on the Tolsum tablet has disappeared during its long sojourn in the soil, but traces left by the stylus on the wood have been preserved. Fortunately the tablet was used only once and is not a palimpsest, where decipherment is further complicated by the presence of traces of several superimposed texts. The Tolsum text is written in a Latin cursive, the normal form of script for written texts as opposed to inscriptions, which usually use printed letters that are fairly easy to read. Latin cursive, on the other hand, is much more difficult for modern readers to decipher. It was used for texts on wax tablets and for those written in ink, but also for texts on other media; a Roman brick from Nijmegen contains this Latin cursive text, scratched into its surface: "On June 1st Quartus shaped 214 bricks".

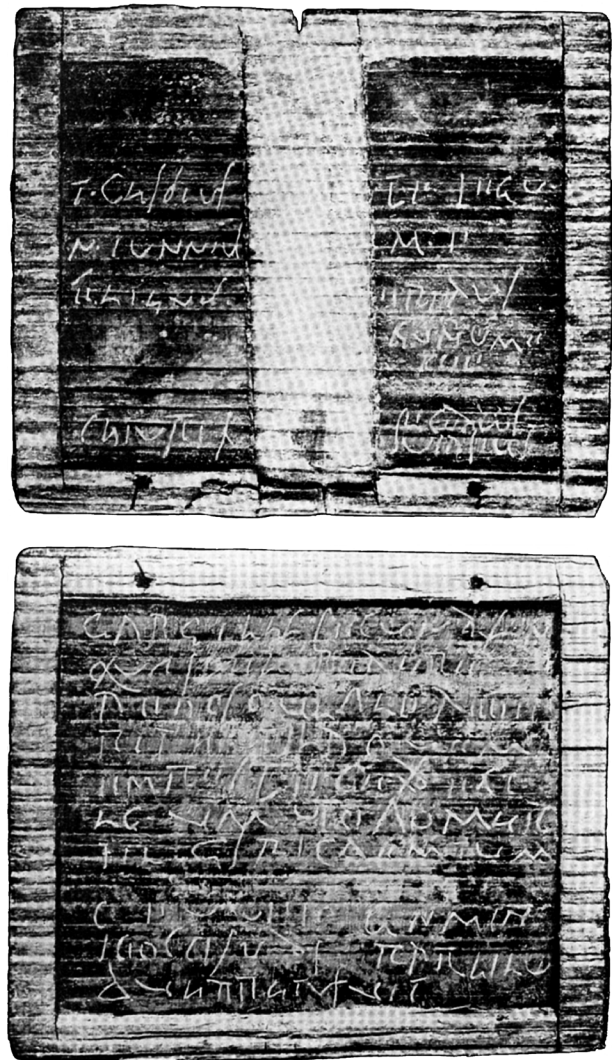


Fig. 1. The Tolsum writing tablet (After: Vollgraf, 1917).

2.3. C.W. Vollgraff's reading of the text

At the request of archaeologist P.C.J. Boeles, C.W. Vollgraff, who was professor of ancient Greek at Groningen from 1908 until 1917, undertook the transcription, translation and interpretation of the Tolsum tablet. In his 1917 publication Vollgraff presented his literal transcription, followed by the Latin text with all abbreviations written out in full and by a Dutch translation. He also published two photographs of the tablet, one of each side, on which he had traced the letters in white as he thought they should be read. Until recently these two photographs of the tablet (fig. 1) were the only ones on which the text could be read, and it was these that were used in subsequent publications (Van Es, 1981: 264, fig. 206; Aarts, 2007: 127, fig. 11). The white tracings of the letters created some confusion about what exactly Vollgraff had done. Some scholars believed that he wrote

on the tablet itself, whereas others thought that he wrote on the negatives, which would make the tracings show up white on the prints. However, Vollgraff himself is quite clear on this, as he wrote in his paper: "Both sides of the tablet were photographed in the laboratory for zoology at Groningen, due to the good care of Prof. J.F. Bemmelen to whom I owe many thanks. Prints of the negatives have been published here, on which I have traced the letters as I saw them in white paint with a small brush". Vollgraff concludes his paper as follows: "May others soon take their turn to study the Tolsum tablet, and either confirm or improve upon the transcription and interpretation proposed here!".

Vollgraff's published text is presented here. (A) represents the text on the front of the tablet, (B) the text on the reverse side.

A

gargiliussecundus n
CXVas. el. riiperii
beeosouilalopetei
riteutilbouem
emitestecesdioci
lg. umutoadmeto
cil. gsricaemtum
cfuufiogmin
iciocosV. ds. . rprlilus
duerretusuet

B

t. cesdius	t. f. leg. u.
n. iunnius	m. f.
ti. lieuus	erepus
	lgunume
	riif
caiuustif	seceduus
	uipsius

Vollgraff translated this as follows:

A

"I, Gargilius Secundus, purchased for one hundred and fifteen sesterces from Stelus, son of Riperius the Beosian, of Lopetejus' estate, according to usage and lawfully, an ox, with Cesdius, centurio of the Legio Victrix, and Mutus Admetus, centurio of the Legio Rapax, as witnesses. Civil law does not apply. Purchased during the consulship of Gaius Fuvius and Gnaeus Minicius on the fifth day before the Ides of September [i.e. September 9th]. Lilus and the veteran Duerretus [promised to] stand surety."

B

Titus Cesdius, son of Titus, of the Legio Victrix.
Numerius Iunnius, son of Marcus.
Tiberius Lievus Erepus, of the Legio Victrix, son of Numerius.
Caius, son of Tiberius, Seceduus.
(the seal of) the selling party."

3. RECEPTION AND DOUBTS

3.1. Reception

Vollgraff's published text quickly became well known. In 1919 a brief note on the discovery appeared in the *American Journal of Archaeology*. In his *Archaeological*

Discussions for that year, William N. Bates wrote: "In 1917 there was found at Groot-Tolsum in Friesland a wax tablet recording in Latin the purchase of an ox". Vollgraff himself presented his discovery internationally through his publication in 1917 in the journal *Mnemosyne*. During the years that followed debate on the text was intense, in particular with regard to its legal phrases and pos-



Fig. 2. Detail of the text with the letters GEMIN (Photograph M.C. Galestin, RUG/GIA)

sible alternative readings of those. Slob discusses the suggested alternatives in his paper on the Tolsum tablet (1998: 2–32). Many archaeological and historical publications also referred to it, although the text itself is seldom commented upon. International attention focussed on the unusual phenomenon of a sales contract between a Roman and an inhabitant of an area far beyond the Roman Empire (Byvanck, 1935: 223, nr. 396; Bloemers, 1983: 169; Jankuhn, 1976: 306; Bechert, 1982: 203; Elton, 1996: 68–69; Verboven, 2007: 313–314; Wells, 1996: 9; Drummond & Nelson, 1994: 114; Whittaker, 1994: 113; Meyer, 2004: 177; Camodeca, 1999: 31, note 87). Not only the legal aspects of the text but also the names of the consuls mentioned in it were subjects of debate, and several possible dates for the text were proposed. Some of these suggestions were exclusively based on the consuls' names, whereas others also referred to what was historically probable. The proposed dates varied from the late 1st century BC to the early 2nd century AD. Vollgraff and Weiss suggested an exact date of AD 116, based on the assumption that one of the consuls' name was Minucius. The other consul's name had been read as Fuuvius, but although Vollgraff knew that a consul with that name had been in office in AD 29 he nonetheless rejected that date on account of the Frisian uprising in AD 28 (Vollgraff, 1917: 92).

In later years numerous alternative dates were proposed. W. Bates (1919: 428) wrote: "Vollgraff dated it in 116 A.D., but it should be placed in 16, 18, 21, 22 or 26 when the names of the *consules suffecti* are not known". Many of the proposed dates fall within the first century AD, and particularly before AD 47 when the Romans finally abandoned Frisia.

The recent Carbon 14 dating commissioned by Slob yielded a date of 1880 ± 70 BP (GrA-769), which corresponds to a calibrated date of roughly the first three centuries AD. This is definitely Roman (Slob, 1998: 27–28). Somewhat surprisingly, although Slob questioned the tablet's authenticity he took for granted the correctness of the transcription of the writing on it. His conclusion was that a date of AD 10–28 was certainly possible (Slob,

1998: 49) but in view of the Carbon 14 results 'not very likely' (Slob, 1998: 51).

The present author was of the opinion that the date should be derived from the text itself. After several failed attempts to produce a 3D-scan of the tablet, enlargements and processed versions of digital photographs of it finally allowed the tentative conclusion that AD 29 was the most likely date. On several of the enlargements the name Fuuvius was clearly legible, followed by a second name which the present author read as Geminus, instead of the 'Gn Minicius' which had always been assumed before. These two names were followed by 'COS', the standard abbreviation for 'consuls' (fig. 2). C Fuuvius Geminus appears on the lists of consuls in the year AD 29, and since his fellow consul for that year was L. Rubellius Geminus, the present author assumed that these identical *cognomina* may have caused some confusion when the Tolsum text was drafted (Galestin, 2008a: 125)

3.2. Doubts

While the tablet's authenticity was being doubted, its context was also disputed. This started when Dutch archaeologist and epigraphist J.E. Bogaers questioned Tolsum as the tablet's original context during the Dutch archaeologists' annual congress in Leeuwarden in 1996 (Bos, 1996). According to Bogaers, finding a Roman legal contract in a Frisian *terp* such as Tolsum was virtually impossible. Such documents could be expected in the context of Roman military camps or settlements, but not in remote Friesland. It seems likely that Bogaers assumed a 2nd century date for the tablet, a time when Tolsum was situated well outside the Roman Empire.

Subsequent to the doubts expressed by Bogaers (which he never published), the Groningen archaeologist J. Bos, suggested that the tablet's location at Tolsum was probably secondary, its original location having been a Roman camp or settlement, from whence it had been removed to be later re-deposited at Tolsum. Bos suggested that a Frisian trader might have transported the tablet as part of a consignment of trade goods from Nijmegen. Another possibility was raised by archaeologist W.A. van Es

(2005: 172–173), who suggested that a Frisian soldier could have stolen the tablet in Xanten when its military settlement was looted and burned during the Batavian uprising of AD 69.

The date of AD 29 for the tablet that was suggested by the present author excludes some of these interpretations, such as the Batavian uprising scenario (which took place in AD 69), while others such as the supposed Frisian merchant from Nijmegen become less likely.

The differences between the two versions of the Tolsum text are obvious. The new reading nowhere mentions the sale of an ox, Lopeteius' villa or the veteran Duerretus. Instead, we now have a precise date, an unidentified location and a number of different individuals. These include two slaves who probably belonged to the lady Iulia Secunda, possibly the wife of Titus Cassius, tribune of the *Legio V*. Also present were Miunnio, soldier of a Batavian unit, and a certain Quadratus who acted as either translator or intermediary (or both).

The researchers pointed out that the witnesses' names are written in several distinct hands (Bowman, Tomlin & Worp, 2009: 164), which suggests that not only the tribune of the *Legio V*, but also the soldier and the slave probably could write.

The text represents a loan contract or bond: clearly somebody owes somebody something. Possibly this is money, although this is not made clear in this part of the text. It was certainly something of value.

This new reading of the text and the precise date for the tablet leave the question of provenience still unanswered: was the location where it was found in 1914, the *terp* Groot Tolsum, indeed its original context? The information yielded by the new text makes it even more urgent to look closely to the circumstances surrounding its discovery, and to all available historical and archaeological data relevant to the period when the text was written, aided by the fact that its precise date has now been established.

4. THE NEW TRANSCRIPTION AND TRANSLATION

In the autumn of 2007 the curator of the Fries Museum, E. Kramer, and the librarian at the Frisian historic and literary centre Tresoar, H. Laagland, brought the Tolsum tablet to Oxford, to the Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents, to be submitted to a thorough examination by A.K. Bowman and R.S.O. Tomlin. This research project was the result of a request by K.A. Worp to ascertain whether it would be possible to decipher the two consuls' names on the tablet, which might provide a more precise date for it. While the names could indeed be deciphered at Oxford, it was noted at the same time that where Vollgraff had read *bovem* (ox or cow), the letters instead suggested *ad quem*. This aroused the researchers' curiosity and induced them to look closely at the rest of the text as well. In the end, they had to conclude that the Tolsum tablet contained a very different text than the one originally read, and duly translated, by Vollgraff. This new text with comments has been published by Bowman, Tomlin & Worp (2009). It was first presented to the public on April 24, 2009 during a special symposium in Leeuwarden called 'Tolsum's Secret', that was organised by Tresoar and the Fries Museum. The texts of the papers presented on that occasion will be published in 2010 in the periodical *It Beaken*.

Below, the new text (in bold) is placed alongside Vollgraff's 1917 text. Both the new text and its translation have been taken from Bowman, Tomlin & Worp (2009). (A) refers to the text on the tablet's front, (B) to that on the reverse side. The two versions are followed by the translation of the new text, as suggested by the authors.

A	
gargiliussecundus n	caro iulia secundae
CXVas. el. riiperii	quos ea redere
beeosouilalopetei	debo qua die petie
riteutilbouem	rit aut ad quem
emitestecesdioci	ea res pertinebi
Ig. umutoadmeto	actum VII k mar
cil. gsricaemtum	tia gir. c. emium
cfuufiogmnin	c fufeo gemin
iciocosV. ds. . rprililus	io cos . . t. rpr. ta
duerretusuet	quadratus vit

“[...] from?] –carus (?) slave of Iulia Secunda which I am obliged to repay to her (?) or to whomsoever this matter pertains on the day on which s/he (?) shall ask for them. Transacted on 23 (?) Februari at Giricaemium (?) in the consulship of C. Fufius Geminus. Quadratus acted as interpreter (*or* intermediary?).”

B			
t. cesdus	t(itus) cassius	t. f. leg. u.	tr(ibunus) leg(ionis) V
n. iunnius	Miunni	m. f.	mil(es) n(umeri)
ti. lieuus	Batavo	erepus	rum
		lgunume	Bonumo
		riif	ti
caiustif	caturix	seceduus	sec
uipsius	ipsius		

Titus Cassius, tribune of the fifth *Legion*.

Miunnio (?) soldier of the unit of the Batavians, of the century (*or decury?*) of Bonumotus (?).

Caturix, slave of the said Secunda (?)."

5. THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

5.1. *Terp* finds in general

Within the coastal zone of north-western Europe, an area stretching from the modern Dutch province of North Holland to the North German coast and the Danish border, hundreds of *terps* can still be found. *Terps*, also called *wierden* (in Dutch) or *Wurten* (in German), are artificially raised settlement platforms, constructed by the locals from the 6th century BC onwards in order to protect themselves from the sea. Living on such platforms remained necessary until the 11th century AD, when the first dikes were built and the protection offered by the *terps* was no longer essential (Galestin, 1999/2000: 225–227).

Many of the *terps* were occupied for hundreds of years. Their soil provides excellent conditions for the preservation of objects, since it consists mainly of an anaerobic, humid mixture of sods, domestic waste and manure. This mixture also proved to be very fertile, and for centuries it was used locally on the fields but around 1840 commercial exploitation of the *terps* took off. From the second half of the 19th century onwards, many *terps* were dug away and their soil transported to less fertile areas. Since by then many *terps* were deserted, this was a fairly straightforward process. The owner would sell the *terp*, or part of it, to a '*terpbaas*', a contractor who would organise the removal and transportation of the soil, which was then offered for sale via advertisements in newspapers (Arjaans, 1991: 45–46). At first the soil was manually shovelled into wheelbarrows and wheeled to ships moored in the local canals, but later rails and horse-drawn tipcars were used (Arjaans, 1991: 45–46).

In the course of the digging process many objects from the *terps*' – often long – settlement history turned up in the soil: sherds and bones but also wood and occasionally metal. Sometimes these were casually discarded as junk, or only picked up after the fertile soil had been spread out over the fields. Such finds fairly quickly attracted scholarly interest, and since it was realized that many objects of potentially great archaeological significance would be lost this way, *terp* contractors were requested to look out for possible finds when removing the soil. Activities were

organised to raise awareness of the *terp* finds, and after the establishment in 1827 of the Fries Genootschap van Geschied-, Oudheid- en Taalkunde (Frisian Historical, Archaeological & Linguistic Association, the predecessor of the present Fries Museum in Leeuwarden), many finds were rescued (Galestin, 1999/2000: 227). Records were being kept of the finds' provenience, and the Fries Museum kept a register for each *terp* of all objects found in it, the so-called *terpenboeken*, including one containing all finds from the *terp* Groot Tolsum.

5.2. The *terp* Groot Tolsum

The remnant of the former *terp* Groot Tolsum is situated c. 4 km south to the town of Franeker. According to Boeles (1917: 103) it originally measured 4 ha, which is quite large. When the former owner, Ms A. Hingst from Amsterdam, sold it, the top layer had already been removed for private use. Commercial exploitation of the soil began in 1910 (Boeles, 1917: 102). Ms Hingst had stipulated that any objects found in the course of the removal of the soil had to be sent to the Fries Museum, and the lawyer P.C.J.A. Boeles, then curator at the museum, reports that he urged the *terp* contractor to see to it that the exact soil type and depth at which each object was found would be accurately recorded, if possible. Thanks to the contractor's cooperation large numbers of finds from Groot Tolsum arrived at the Fries Museum. They were there registered under site number 123, which soon comprised over three hundred inventory numbers, and since some of those consist of an entire crate of sherds the actual number of finds is even higher.

The famous tablet arrived at the museum in 1914. It was one of the last finds collected from the *terp*, receiving inventory number 346. Boeles (1917: 103) reports how it was wrapped in a newspaper at its arrival and was accompanied by a note which stated: "from the black ca. 15 cm below Summer Level". The Frisian 'Summer Level' corresponds to 66 cm below sea level, or in Dutch NAP (Nationaal Amsterdams Peil), which is the reference point from which all elevations in the Netherlands are calculated. A depth of 15 cm below Frisian Summer Level thus corresponds to 81 cm below sea level. It is not a very

accurate measurement, but it does indicate that the tablet was found deep down in the *terp* soil. This agrees with the observation that it was the last object to be sent to the Fries Museum, *i.e.* that it came from the deepest soil levels which were the last to be removed. Unfortunately there is no more information available about its context.

5.3. Other finds from Groot Tolsum

The majority of objects found in this *terp* consists of sherds of locally made pottery. Of these, 1044 are still stored in the Fries Museum (Taayke, 1990: 211, No. 66). The pottery dates largely from the 4th century BC to the 3rd century AD (Taayke, 1990: 171 and 184) but also includes a few sherds from later periods, e.g. the late Carolingian (Boeles, 1917: 104). Roman pottery is mostly represented by *terra sigillata*, 53 sherds in total (Galestin, 1992: 36). Three of these belong to pottery that was produced in Trier and three others from pottery produced in Rheinzabern (Volkers, 1991: 184–185). Besides the *terra sigillata* there are a few sherds from other Roman wares, such as the bottom part of a cup and the rim of a jar (Boeles, 1917: Nos. 4 and 5).

Besides the wax tablet the *terp* produced three other unusual finds: an oil lamp and two statuettes of gods. These types of Roman objects are much rarer in the *terp* area than pottery, and they may shed some light on Groot Tolsum's position in the Roman period.

1. Fragment of a terracotta oil lamp (Inv. 123, 325). Diam. c. 6 cm (fig. 3). The lamp is made of a grey clay covered with a light brown paint with dark brown spots and lines. On the shoulder are three ribs, and the disc is decorated with a shell motif which in spite of severe damage still shows eight ribs. Traces of a



Fig. 3. Terracotta oil lamp from Tolsum (Photograph Fries Museum, Leeuwarden). Scale 1:1.

handle are visible on the shoulder. On the bottom is a flat ring. The nozzle is formed by two volutes which spring from the shoulder and taper towards the tip; the tip itself is now missing but was probably angular. The lamp can be classified as type Loeschke I A (Loeschke, 1919: 212–213). Comparable specimens have been found in the military sites Haltern and Xanten, among others, and were in fact produced there (Hanel, 1991: 28). They are Augustan and Tiberian in date (Vegas, 1966: 72–74).



Fig. 4. Fragments of a terracotta statuette representing seated Fortuna, from Tolsum (Photograph Fries Museum, Leeuwarden).

2. Three fragments of a pipe clay statuette of Fortuna (Inv. 123, 158) (fig. 4). The goddess is seated on a throne, flanked on both sides by a *cornucopia*. Her feet rest on a footstool. Beside her are two naked boys, one kneeling and the other standing. Van Boekel (1983: 342–342) published these fragments as being found at “Tzum, from the *terp* Tolsum (Groot Tolsum)”. The statuette was mass-produced from a mould. It is commonly ascribed to ALFIUS whose workshop was situated in Cologne (Schauerte, 1985: 211, No. 364; Van Boekel, 1983: 342–343). This type of statuette dates from the last quarter of the 1st century AD (Schauerte,

1985: 210) or to the transition between the 1st and the 2nd centuries AD (Schauerte, 1985: 57 and 34). Its original height is 20 cm. A drawing of a statuette from the same mould found at Remagen in Germany shows how the Tolsum fragments should be reconstructed. The Tolsum Fortuna fragments are unique in that they represent the only pipe clay or terracotta statuette from the late 1st-century AD that was found north of the Rhine. According to the distribution map of statuettes produced by ALFIUS, Cologne is after Tolsum the northernmost location where they occur (Schauerte, 1985: 58, fig. 9).

3. Bronze statuette of the god Mars (Inv. 123, 106). Height 18.5 cm (fig. 5). The god leans on his right leg; his right arm is raised, the left is bent. He is naked apart from a Corinthian helmet on his head (Boeles, 1917: 48 and fig. 1). Zadoks, Peters & Van Es (1967: 44–47, No. 18) published the statuette as having been found at “Tsjum, 1911, from the *terp* near De Vlaren”. Similar statuettes of Mars have been found in north-western France and in Belgium, but a few



Fig. 5. Bronze statuette representing nude Mars (Photograph Fries Museum, Leeuwarden).

are known from Friesland as well, which was outside the Roman Empire when these statuettes were produced. Although it is difficult to date them precisely, they are usually assigned to the second half of the 2nd century AD. The Tolsum statuette resembles another Frisian Mars statuette, found near Franeker (Galestin, 1994: 157).

6. TOLSUM IN AD 29

6.1. Historical context: the role of Frisians

The best way to gain an impression of the situation in Friesland during the 1st century AD is to consult Roman sources. Frisians at the time left no written sources; it is even unknown if they called themselves Frisians or if the Romans gave them that name. We therefore depend on what various ancient authors write about them, even though some of those authors never set foot in northern Europe or lived much later and recycled information taken from earlier writers.

The historian Cassius Dio, who lived around the middle of the 2nd century AD, described in his text (written in Greek) an expedition to the north undertaken by the Roman military commander Drusus, during which Romans and Frisians met, probably for the first time. Cassius Dio mentions how Drusus in the year 12 BC sailed northwards toward the ocean. After subjugating the Frisians in the northern coastal area he then continued eastwards, possibly via the (precursor of the) Wadden Sea or the North Sea. According to Cassius Dio, some Frisians accompanied Drusus over land and Frisian men came to his aid when the Roman ships were stranded, possibly in the Ems estuary.

We may therefore conclude that this first meeting proceeded fairly peacefully and without trouble, at least from a Roman perspective. In the years that followed Romans probably revisited the Frisian territory a number of times. The future emperor Tiberius led a military expedition to the north in AD 4/5, and Germanicus, Drusus' son, was active in the north as military commander in AD 14/15. He too made contact with the Frisians.

We do not know how the Frisians felt about these contacts, although it seems they did not resent them. Some of them may have seen it as an opportunity to get to know the world outside, and they may have joined the Roman army; Roman commanders frequently enlisted men from subjugated tribes. A few of these adventurous Frisians are known by name. Bassus and Hilarus both died in Rome at the age of respectively 40 and 33, according to their tombstones that were found on a large communal grave in Rome, where all members of the Imperial guard had been buried in an immense subterranean vault. The two Frisians had probably been drafted by Germanicus in AD 15 (Galestin, 2007/2008: 695).

The next piece of information on the Frisians dates from AD 28, the year before the text on the Tolsum tablet was written. By sheer coincidence we are fairly well informed about AD 28 since it was the year of the Frisian uprising, which was a reaction to the tax of ox hides that had been imposed on the local population. The tax had been levied for the first time by Drusus in 12 BC and had not caused problems for many years, until the Roman Olennius was appointed to collect it in AD 28. As *primipilus*, Olennius was a high-ranking officer in the Roman army. He was, however, clearly unacquainted with the details of Frisian husbandry, especially with the fact that Frisian cows were as a rule much smaller than Roman ones. He consequently insisted upon hides of a size the Frisians could not possibly deliver, and this unreasonable demand had caused serious problems for many of them. According to Tacitus (*Annales* IV 72-73), the uprising began after many Frisians had lost their cattle and land, and had had to sell their women and children as slaves. Complaints had been filed but achieved nothing, leaving the Frisians with no option but to revolt. Tacitus himself considered the uprising justified as having been provoked by Roman greed.

The Frisians crucified the Roman tax collectors, and Olennius had to take refuge at a Roman military post, *Castellum Flevum*. The governor of Lower Germany, Lucus Apronius, sent soldiers of the *Legio V* to Frisia as well as auxiliaries and cavalry of the Cananefates, and these troops eventually managed to restore order. By then, however, over 900 Roman soldiers had been killed in a forest dedicated to the goddess Baduhenna, and 400 others had committed suicide when surrounded in the villa of veteran Cruptorix. In spite of the fact that many Romans had died and were left unburied, Tiberius did not retaliate. He suppressed the news about the losses and refrained from ordering a punitive war. According to Tacitus (*Annales* IV 74), the senate was at the time absorbed in more pressing matters than embarrassing events in some out-of-the-way corner of the vast Empire.

The Frisians are not mentioned again until twenty years later when, in AD 47, general Corbulo wished to make his mark. He marched to the north, took hostages amongst the Frisians, who had remained hostile since the uprising, and imposed laws. His success was short-lived, for Tacitus mentions (*Annales* XI 19) that the emperor Claudius recalled Corbulo the same year. From then on the Frisians were left in peace.

6.2. Archaeological context

Although the historical sources describe the Roman activities in the north in great detail, these activities left few visible traces. As yet no features have been discovered in the Northern Netherlands that might be associated with the Roman presence there, such as military ditches or traces of encampments. The northernmost traces of a Roman army camp on mainland Europe were excavated at Velsen in the Dutch province of North Holland. Unlike

soil features, however, Roman objects associated with a Roman presence do occur in the Northern Netherlands. They include many objects that were unearthed during excavations in the Frisian *terp* Winsum-Bruggeburen and whose interpretation is still uncertain.

6.3. Velsen (*Castellum Flevum*?)

Near Velsen in the Dutch province of Noord-Holland a Roman naval base was excavated. The soil features and objects at the site indicated that the base was probably established in AD 15 (Bosman & De Weerd, 2004: 52-53). This naval base is usually identified with the *Castellum Flevum* mentioned by Tacitus in his description of the Frisian uprising of AD 28. Although Tacitus mentions that *Castellum Flevum* came under siege, he does not say whether it was taken. If it was, it was functional again in AD 29, only a year later. Oak planks used in the foundation of the gate in the western wall of phase 2b, north of the tower, provided a tree-ring date of the spring of AD 29 (Bosman, 1997: 27-28). The base functioned until after AD 40 (Bosman & De Weerd, 2004: 54).

6.4. Winsum

Although the Velsen naval base was the northernmost Roman fortification in mainland Europe, the Romans were probably forced on occasion to camp further north as well. A potential candidate for a Roman outpost or temporary camp is the Frisian *terp* Winsum. In 1997 the Groningen Institute of Archaeology (GIA) carried out excavations in the lowest levels of the former *terp* Winsum-Bruggeburen, which was all that was left of the *terp* after the rest had been commercially removed earlier. More than five hundred sherds of Roman pottery turned up as well as other Roman objects and soil features. The features mainly represented remains of ditches and pits, which could not be linked to any Roman military presence on the site. The finds included, besides pottery and other finds, Roman coins and bronzes and dated mainly to the very end of the 1st century BC and the early 1st century AD. A large variety of pottery shapes and -types was represented, including amphoras for wine, oil and fish sauce, sherds of *terra sigillata* plates and cups, and remains of storage jars and jugs. Among the other finds were fibulae, a bronze lamp and a Roman weight (Galestin, 1999/2000; 2001/2002a; 2001/2002b), as well as a number of silver and bronze coins including half ones. Such half coins characterize military contexts. In military outposts there was a chronic shortage of small change, and since a coin's value equalled its metal content, cutting them up in halves was an easy way to solve this problem.

Similar combinations of Roman pottery types and coins have only been found in military sites, such as the army base on the Kops Plateau in Nijmegen, where excavation of a military latrine produced a similar assemblage (Van Enckevort & Zee, 1996: 53). Nijmegen was



Fig. 6. Distribution map of early Roman objects in the Northern Netherlands and other places mentioned in the text. 1. Bentumersiel, 2. Wierum, 3. Zoutkamp, 4. Blija, 5. Ferwerd, 6. Cornjum Kerkterp, 7. Cornjum Dekamaterp, 8. Bilgaard, 9. Hatsum, 10. Winsum, 11. Tolsum, 12. Fyns, 13. Midlaren, 14. Wedde, 15. Bargerosterveld, 16. De Krim, 17. Onna, 18. Velsen, 19. Valkenburg, 20. Alphen aan den Rijn, 21. Vechten, 22. Ophemert, 23. Tiel, 24. Arnhem-Meinerswijk, 25. Nijmegen, 26. Xanten (Drawing E. Bolhuis, RUG/GIA).

the command centre for the Roman legions in the region, and it was from Nijmegen that expeditions to the north set out.

So far, these characteristically military pottery assemblages have never turned up in non-military native settlements. The presence of such assemblages at Winsum therefore suggests that, in spite of the absence of recognisable Roman military features, Roman soldiers nonetheless lived at Winsum for some time. Likewise, similar Roman objects excavated at Bentumersiel and other locations are unlikely to derive from Germanicus' stranded fleet in the area in AD 16, as has been suggested (Kehne, 2008: 268–269, note 131). The large number of objects in both Bentumersiel and Winsum, as well as the location of these settlements away from the coast, rather rules that out. A more likely explanation is that Roman soldiers left these objects after abandoning the *terp* at Winsum. They may have been temporarily stationed there to accompany tax collectors who were collecting the ox hides. Any traces of an army structure that may have been there

would have disappeared without record when the main *terp* body was commercially dug away. On that occasion, too, Roman objects from the early 1st century AD turned up (Galestin, 1999/2000: 227–228).

6.5. The Northern Netherlands during the 1st century AD

The Roman objects from Winsum are unusual, in that they probably represent actual Roman military presence on the site, but other sites in the Northern Netherlands have also produced early 1st-century Roman objects. Their numbers are always few, however, and nothing indicates that Roman soldiers may have stayed at any of these sites. How these objects ended up in the north is unknown. They may have been souvenirs brought back by a former soldier returning from a stint of duty in the Roman army, or they may be the result of other forms of direct contact between that army and the native population. Exchange, gifts or even loot are all possibilities. Many of these finds



Fig. 7. Terracotta oil lamps from Hatsum (a), Blija (b), Winsum (c) (Fries Museum, Leeuwarden, Photographs M.C. Galestin) and from Wierum (d) (Photograph Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden). Scale 1:1.

lack a clear context, which makes their interpretation even more difficult. Most of them were found in Frisian *terps*, as the distribution map shows (fig. 6)

What makes these early 1st-century Roman objects at Winsum important is that such finds are rare in native settlements in the region. They are virtually limited to army camps and to settlements near them, such as the site at Tiel-Passewaaij where excavations produced only one Augustan *terra sigillata* sherd (type Haltern 8/Conspectus 22/1; Heeren 2006: 103, Fig. 8.9). Tiel-Passewaaij is situated on the river Waal, c. 30 km downstream from Nijmegen. By contrast, many such objects, including oil lamps, *terra sigillata* sherds and coins, have been found at sites in the Northern Netherlands.

6.5.1. Oil lamps

Fragments of oil lamps have been found at three Frisian *terps*: Hatsum, Blija and Winsum (fig. 7). A fourth fragment came from Wierum in the province of Groningen.

Fragment of a small Roman oil lamp from Hatsum, L. 3.5 cm (Fries Museum Inv. 50-199). The clay is orange-red, with a rough interior and a smooth exterior. The shoulder consists of a wide band with a narrow rib. On the disc, two human lower legs with feet are still visible, but it is impossible to reconstruct the complete scene or to determine to whom the legs belong. On the nozzle, traces of

the base of one of originally two broad volutes are still present. These volutes had been attached to the outer rim of the body of the lamp, and originally tapered towards the opening in the nozzle. This type of volute base characterizes Augustan and Tiberian lamps of type Loeschke I (Vegas, 1966: 72–74).

Fragment of a small Roman oil lamp from Blija, L 10 cm (Fries Museum Inv. 28B-176). The clay is grey and covered in orange slip. The shoulder consists of one wide and two narrow ribs. The disc shows a charging Hercules; in his raised right hand he holds a club, and a lion skin is draped over his left arm. Between the hero's legs is the round pouring hole. Two broad volutes are attached to the lamp's rim and taper towards the narrow nozzle, of which the tip is missing. A similar motif is found on a fragment of an oil lamp (Loeschke, 1919: 421 and Pl. XV, 718). The lamp can be classified as type Loeschke I A and dates to the Augustan/Tiberian period (Vegas, 1966: 72–74).

Fragment of a small Roman oil lamp from Winsum, L 2.5 x 3.5 cm (Fries Museum Inv. Winsum-Bruggeburen 1971-72, Box 2590). Measurements 3.5 x 2.5 cm. The orange-brown *terra sigillata* fragment shows part of the shoulder, one volute and the pouring hole. The shape of the preserved volute suggests a lamp of type Loeschke I A, of Augustan/Tiberian date (Vegas, 1966: 72–74).

Fragment of a small Roman oil lamp from Wierum, L 10 cm (Van Giffen, 1913: 163 and Pl. III below). Formerly collection Van Giffen 2164 (Rijksmuseum van Oudheden Inv. B 1912/2.533). The clay is grey and covered with an orange-brown slip. The shoulder has three ridges and the remainder of a handle. The disk shows a figure of a winged Victoria to the left with a shield. The two volutes taper towards the narrow nozzle with a pointed tip. The lamp is type Loeschke I A and dates to the Augustan/Tiberian period. Lamps with a similar motif are in Vindonissa (Loeschke, 1919: 392) and Friedberg (Simon, 1976: 202–203, Nr. 215).

All four oil lamps date from the early 1st century AD. Similar lamps have been found in Roman army camps such as Haltern and Xanten (Von Detten, 1995: 71, Abb. 4) in Germany, and Nijmegen and Velsen in the Netherlands. To the knowledge of the present author such lamps have never been found in native settlements from the Roman period in the Southern Netherlands. This military association makes it even more remarkable that several of them have been found in Friesland.

6.5.2. *Terra Sigillata*

Early 1st century sherds of *terra sigillata* from the Northern Netherlands come from a number of Frisian *terps*. Apart from the fragments from Winsum the sherds come from Bilgaard, Cornjum and Ferwerd in Friesland (fig. 8) and from Midlaren and Bargerosterveld in Drenthe. Similar sherds were also found in Velsen and in Nijmegen.

Bilgaard, 14k - 33. Two fragments of a *terra sigillata* cup, diam. 12 cm (Boeles, 1917: 50 and fig. 10; Boeles, 1951: 129, No. 1). Type Ha 8 / Conspectus 22. Similar to a specimen from Velsen (Bosman, 1997: fig. 6.31, 2). Date: Augustan/Tiberian.

Cornjum, church *terp*, 20-215. Fragment of a cup, diam. 12 cm (Boeles, 1951: 129, No. 2) of type Haltern 8 / Consp. 22. Date: Augustan/Tiberian.

Cornjum, *terp* Dekama, 120-293. Fragment of a cup of type Drag 24/25, diam. 11.5 cm. Similar to a cup from Velsen (Bosman, 1997: fig. 6.32, 1).

Cornjum, *terp* Dekama, 120-125. Fragment of a cup of type Drag 24/25, diam. 11.5 cm. Almost identical to the foregoing fragment. Probably not from the same cup because of a different colour.

Ferwerd, 101-1406. Rim fragment of a *terra sigillata* plate of type Drag 15/17, diam. 19 cm..

Midlaren. Fragment of a *terra sigillata* plate of type Consp. 18. Date: early 1st century (Galestin, 2008b: 329, fig. 16.2 and Pl. 16, 1).

Bargerosterveld. Fragment of a *terra sigillata* plate of type Ha 1/Service Ic. Date: middle to late Augustan (Van der Sande, 2003/2004: 352, fig. 3, 3). As was mentioned above, early 1st-century Roman objects are rare in native settlements, being virtually limited to army camps and to settlements near them. The only such objects from a reasonably well-documented military context in the Northern Netherlands come from a grave that was discovered in 1933 in Bargerosterveld in Drenthe. Its contents included a *terra sigillata* sherd (described above) and fragments of armour (Van der Sanden, 2003/04: 358). The grave has been interpreted as belonging to an ex-soldier of the Roman army who had returned home, and as such it is unique in the Northern Netherlands, where no other Roman objects are known that can be associated with equal certainty with former Roman soldiers.

6.5.3. *Coins*

Coins from the reigns of the emperors Augustus and Tiberius have been found on several sites in the Northern Netherlands. One early coin in itself has little value to date an event, since coins tended to circulate for a long time. However, several early coins found in association, *i.e.* a coin hoard, provide an important clue since the date of the most recent coins is likely to reflect, or at least to lie close to, the date of their deposition. Early 1st-century coin hoards are known from Fyns (prov. Friesland; Van der Vin, 1992: 74–77), Zoutkamp (prov. Groningen; Van der Vin, 1996: 1098), De Nieuwe Krim (prov. Drenthe; Van der Vin, 1996: 2035) and Onna (prov. Overijssel; Van der Vin, 1996: 3028).

Various explanations have been offered for the presence of these coin hoards in the Northern Netherlands. They may have been buried by Roman soldiers or by native civilians. The hoard from Fyns is known to have been found in a *terp*, which suggests that the person who buried it may have been an inhabitant of that *terp* who had perhaps received the coins through transactions with Romans, or whilst serving in the Roman army. A hoard from Wedde in Groningen, for example, consisting of a bronze Celtic coin and two fibulae, has been ascribed to an ex-soldier who returned home some time during the early 1st century AD (Groenendijk, 2000: 74–78).

The distribution map of Roman objects of the early 1st century from the Northern Netherlands shows that these coins predominantly derive from the Frisian *terp* area, especially the *terps* Blija, Ferwerd, Bilgaard and Cornjum in the district Oostergo and those of Winsum, Hatsum, Fyns and Tolsum, all close to each other, in the district Westergo. In all these cases there may be a link with the presence of Roman soldiers in Winsum early in the 1st century AD.

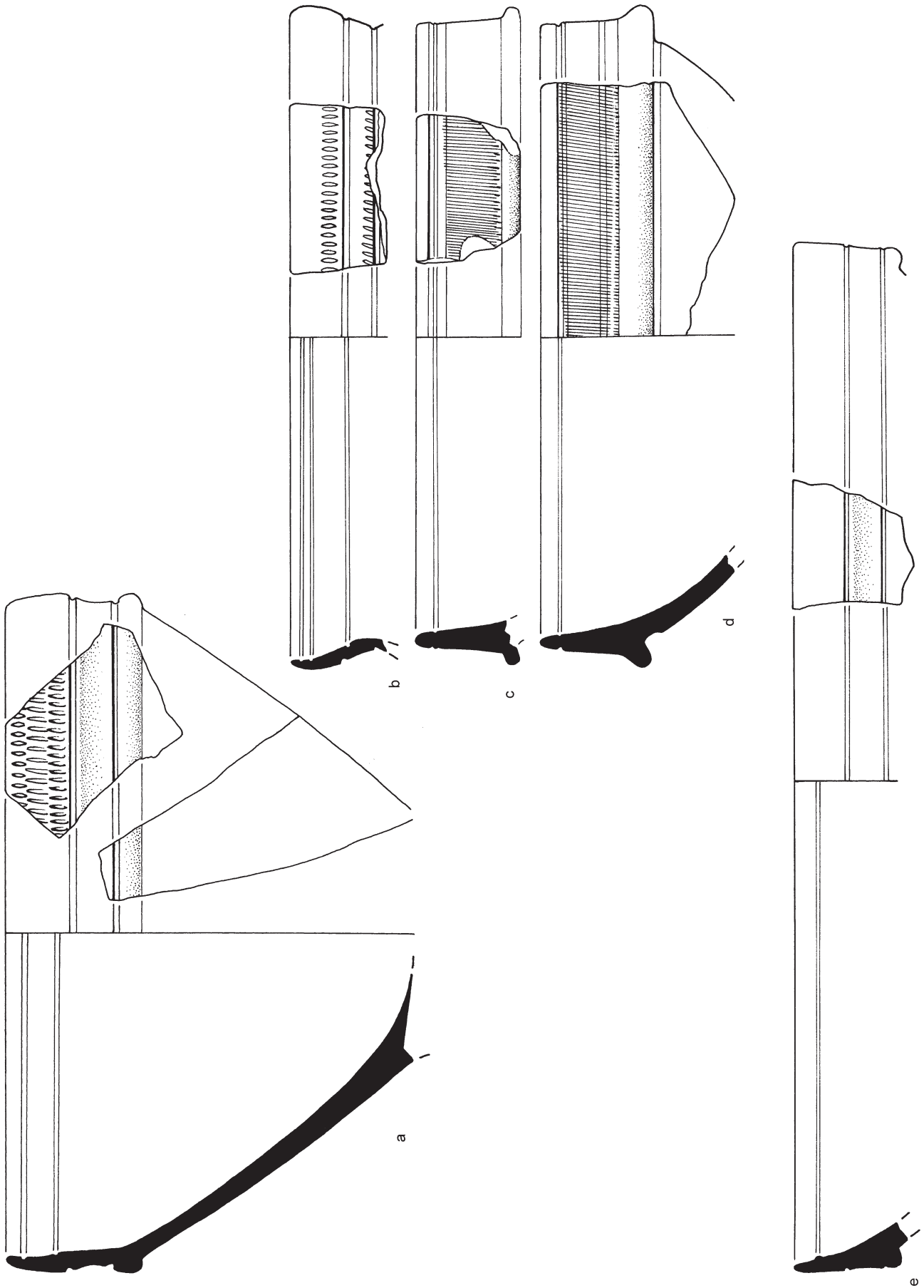


Fig. 8. 1st-century *terra sigillata* from Frisian *terps*. From top to bottom: Bilgaard 14k-33 (a); Cornjum 20-215 (b); Cornjum 120-125 (c); Cornjum 120-293 (d); Ferwerd 101-1406 (e) (Drawing M.A. Los-Weijns, RUG/GIA). Scale 1:1.

7. BACK TO TOLSUM

The survey of the historical sources showed that there were contacts on a regular basis between the Roman army and the Frisians following the first meeting in 12 BC. The – for the Romans – disastrous battle of the Teutoburg forest in AD 9, when Germanic troops annihilated two Roman legions, did not change that. Not even the Frisian uprising of AD 28 induced the Romans to give up their naval base at Velsen, which was functional again by AD 29, as was explained above.

The archaeological data, too, suggest not merely contact with the Roman world from the early 1st century AD onwards, but the physical presence of Roman military personnel in the Northern Netherlands, at least at some locations. Elsewhere, the presence of Roman objects may perhaps be associated with former soldiers who returned home, or with other forms of direct interaction.

The early Roman objects from Tolsum, especially the wax tablet and the oil lamp, are likely to have ended up there as a result of such interaction. Their early date, their association with military contexts elsewhere and the fact that similar objects were rarely traded over long distances all point towards contacts between the local inhabitants and, probably, the Roman soldiers at Winsum. In such a situation the drafting of a legal contract is not as unlikely as has often been thought, and there is no reason to place the origins of this document anywhere else but in Friesland itself. Moreover, a willingness to travel far to settle legal matters was by no means unheard of in the Roman world. An example is provided by Tacitus (*Annales* XIII 54) who mentions how two Frisian ‘kings’, Verritus and Malorix, travelled all the way to Rome in order to plead in person, and with the emperor Nero himself, their case regarding claims on an area north of the Rhine.

The Tolsum contract was drafted in February, *i.e.* in winter, a time when the Roman legions would have been stationed in their winter quarters. Although the salty waters of lake Flevo, then the main route to Friesland, are known to have frozen over during particularly severe winters (six times during the late 17th century; Buisman & Van Engelen, 2006: 861, Appendix 7), the lake was usually open. A small Roman party may well have sailed from their winter quarters, probably at Xanten, to the north following orders (or at their own request) to settle some business there.

7.1. Giricaemium

The text on the Tolsum tablet mentions the name of the location where it was written. Some of the letters are difficult to read, but *Giricaemium* seems the most likely transcription. Where *Giricaemium* was situated is unknown, but it clearly is not one of the main 1st-century sites in the region where the *Legio V* was normally stationed: Xanten (*Castra Vetera*), Nijmegen, Vechten (*Fectio*),

Meinerswijk (*Castra Herculis*) or Velsen. The identification of most of these sites with their antique names is certain, with the exception of Velsen that may have corresponded to *Castellum Flevum*. An army camp would probably have been indicated as *castra* or *hiberna*, as was the case on for example the tablets from Vindonissa in Switzerland (Speidel, 1996: 98 and 102). *Giricaemium* is therefore likely to have been another, as yet unidentified location. Of all known sites of the early 1st century between Xanten and the Northern Netherlands, only Winsum, near Tolsum, has produced large numbers of Roman objects.

7.2. The individuals mentioned in the text

Wherever the contract may have been drafted and signed, the persons mentioned in it are interesting in themselves.

Titus Cassius, tribune of Legio V

The first person is Titus Cassius, tribune of *Legio V* which was at the time stationed at Xanten (Hanel, 1991). A *graffito* on a *terra sigillata* cup Drag 24, discovered at Velsen, perhaps mentions *Legio V Alaudae* (Bosman, 1997: 80 and fig. 5.13, 4; Bosman & De Weerd, 2004: 33). On the basis of a *graffito* >LIICV, (centurio) LEG(ionis) V [Alaudae] on a wall fragment of a flagon from Arnhem-Meinerswijk (*Castra Herculis*) it is suspected that soldiers of the *Legio V* were possibly stationed there; however, several other interpretations of the *graffito* are possible (Willems, 1984: 174, No. 7 and fig. 98).

Miunnio of a Batavian army unit

A certain Miunnio of a Batavian army unit is also mentioned as having been present. However, there is no information on any 1st-century Batavian army unit; all references to such a unit date from a later period. However, a *graffito* on a *terra sigillata* plate found in Velsen may read BATAVVS (fig. 9). According to R.S.O. Tomlin (Oxford; pers. comm., 2010), there “was enough evidence of being two V’s, the second one being linked to the final S”. Unfortunately the plate was without context, which makes its date rather uncertain (Bosman, 1997: 79–80 and fig. 5.13, 1; for a colour photograph see Lendering & Bosman, 2010: 124). The Velsen *graffito* may or may not refer to the Batavian unit mentioned on the Tolsum tablet.



Fig. 9. *Graffito* showing the letters BATAVI (After: Bosman, 1997: fig. 5.13, 1).

Quadratus, the interpreter/mediator

A certain Quadratus is mentioned as translator or mediator (which of the two functions was his is not clear; perhaps both). He did not sign the document but may have assisted when any linguistic problems arose.

The two slaves: Caturix and ... carus

Also involved were two slaves probably belonging to Iulia Secunda. One of them, Caturix, signed as a witness. The other was party to the contract and his name was the first to be written, in the upper left corner of the tablet. The remaining letters read*carus*; perhaps the first part of the name was on the first tablet which is now missing. The full name may have been Andecarus (Bowman, Tomlin & Worp, 2009: 162 and 167); he may have acted on behalf of Iulia Secunda.

Iulia Secunda

Iulia Secunda was probably not present in person when the contract was drafted. She was indirectly involved in it, however, via her two slaves. The presence of women in the Roman army is well documented. One of the sources is for example a note in which the wife of an officer invites one of her friends, also an officer's wife but living in another camp, to attend her birthday party. Although the note was largely written by a clerk the lady, Claudia Severa, wrote the final sentence herself (Bowman, 1994: 88).

The great Unknown

The most interesting person, and the one most obviously missing, is the individual who according to the text owed something. What exactly was owed is unknown; it may have been money or other goods. Unfortunately the individual's name was mentioned on the middle section of the contract, which has disappeared. His (or her?) name, whether it was Frisian or Roman, therefore remains a mystery.

7.3. Stylus tablets in the Netherlands

The Tolsum stylus tablet is one of the earliest known Roman ones. Many were found in Pompeii, the oldest of those dating from AD 15 (Meyer, 2004: 126). Most of the Pompeii tablets were associated with the military, as is the case throughout Europe (Meyer, 2004: 176 and 178). Stylus tablets found in the Netherlands also mainly derive from military contexts such as Velsen, Valkenburg and Alphen aan de Rijn. The only tablets from civilian contexts are the Tolsum tablet and a fragment found during excavations at Ophemert in the Betuwe district, southwest of Tiel.

Excavations at Velsen yielded several fragments of tablets and one complete specimen (Bosman, 1997: fig. 5.17), sadly with an illegible text.

At Valkenburg a total of c. 24 fragments were excavated (Glasbergen, 1972: 67). One of them contained a

letter addressed to a soldier of the *Cohors III Gallorum* (Glasbergen, 1972: 70–74). Four fragments found during the first excavation in 1941, together form a diptych that still bears visible traces of writing, and another fragment shows clear traces of writing as well, although so far none of it could be deciphered (Glasbergen, 1972: fig. 30 and 32).

Research carried out at Alphen aan de Rijn resulted in three tablets, including a virtually complete one (Polak, Kloosterman & Niemeijer, 2004: 230–231 and fig. 101–102) on which traces of letters are still visible on both sides.

Fragments of a tablet were also excavated at Ophemert-De Steendert in the province of Gelderland. They came from the infill of a well dating from the Flavian period. This tablet has not yet been deciphered either (Derks & Roymans, 2007: 135, fig. 6).

8. SUMMARY

After nearly a hundred years, the text on the stylus tablet from the Frisian *terp* Groot Tolsum has at last been deciphered. It represents a bond, written in AD 29 at an unidentified location. The Tolsum tablet is the middle section of a set of originally three. Although it cannot be entirely ruled out that Groot Tolsum is not the location where the contract was originally drafted – a returning native soldier, for example, may have brought it with him – the nature of the other objects found nearby suggests that this is highly unlikely, and that Tolsum is indeed the primary context. The large number of Roman objects from the nearby *terp* Winsum, in particular, suggests that Roman soldiers were stationed there. The place name mentioned in the text, *Giricaemium*, may in fact be the Latin (or rather Latinized) name for the *terp* Winsum.

Roman military presence in Friesland in AD 29 is not surprising; after the Frisian uprising, less than a year before, there would very likely still be military activity north of the Rhine. The rapid repair or reconstruction of the naval base at Velsen during the summer of AD 29 also points to this. Possibly the 'Batavi' mentioned on a sherd found at Velsen refers to the Batavian army unit mentioned on the Tolsum tablet.

The contract dates to February of AD 29. Apparently, wintry conditions were no impediment to a party of Roman soldiers and others to travel to Friesland for a (presumably) lucrative deal; it may have been a welcome interruption of their long sojourn in their winter quarters.

The text on the Tolsum tablet is a bond, a type of contract that could have been drafted anywhere in the Roman world. The fact that it mentions both the *Legio V* and a Batavian army unit, however, places it almost certainly within the sphere of the military and the territory of that legion.

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