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# Between daily existence and divine order: the landscapes of Roman Gaul

*Ton Derks*

In his introduction to a recent collection of essays, the British anthropologist Eric Hirsch reached the conclusion that all landscapes are double-faced and consist of a foreground actuality of everyday existence and a background potentiality of an imagined timeless ideal (Hirsch 1995). The phenomenal and the imagined landscape are alternately perceived and inextricably intertwined, in that people continuously seek to realize in ordinary life the ideals of an imaginary existence. While, according to this view, daily practices like tilling the fields or herding the cattle generally might be the simple 'mundane' activities for which we normally take them, at other moments they might evoke memories of an existence beyond or be experienced as re-enactments of a divine model transmitted through the recitation of myths, the performance of rituals or the building of monuments.

In comparison to the dialectic approach advocated by Hirsch and others, the archaeological study of the landscape has always been remarkably one-sided. For a long time, attention was concentrated on the physical environment and the assessment of its impact on the realities of everyday life. The imagined landscape as embodied in stories and myths was either simply neglected or considered a realm inaccessible to the archaeologist. This situation has rapidly changed over the past decade, and the interpretation of what sometimes is called the 'ritual landscape' is now a major topic of research, particularly in the prehistoric sections of our discipline. But in much new work the objective and rationalistic analysis that dominated the field until recently now seems to have been completely replaced by subjective interpretations of meaning, and the question of how the symbolic landscapes which are in

the centre of interest today related to experiences of daily life is seldom addressed seriously (cf. Derks 1997, 127-30).

In this paper, I will try to redress the balance. I hope to do so by presenting a case taken from my own work on Roman Gaul, for which, thanks to the help of written documents, the link between an experienced and an imagined world is much easier to make than for any of the prehistoric periods.<sup>1</sup> The aim of my contribution is to demonstrate that differences in the organization of the cultural landscape are not simply determined by different climatic or soil conditions, nor by different degrees or different ways of integration into wider economic or political networks. Without wishing to deny their role in the structuring of the phenomenal landscape, I suggest that different ways of life and the concomitant differences in regimes of values and cosmologies should be considered as at least equally important factors. My argument falls into three sections. First, I will offer a short introduction to the realities of farm life in Northern Gaul. Next, I will present the epigraphical data upon which my reconstruction of North Gallic cosmologies is largely based. And finally, by comparing this evidence with that available for the much better documented Mediterranean area, I will present my interpretation of how in Northern Gaul the experienced reality of everyday life may have articulated with a mythical reality of an imaginary world.

## Farm life in Northern Gaul

In the area between Seine and Rhine roughly three types of natural landscapes can be distinguished:

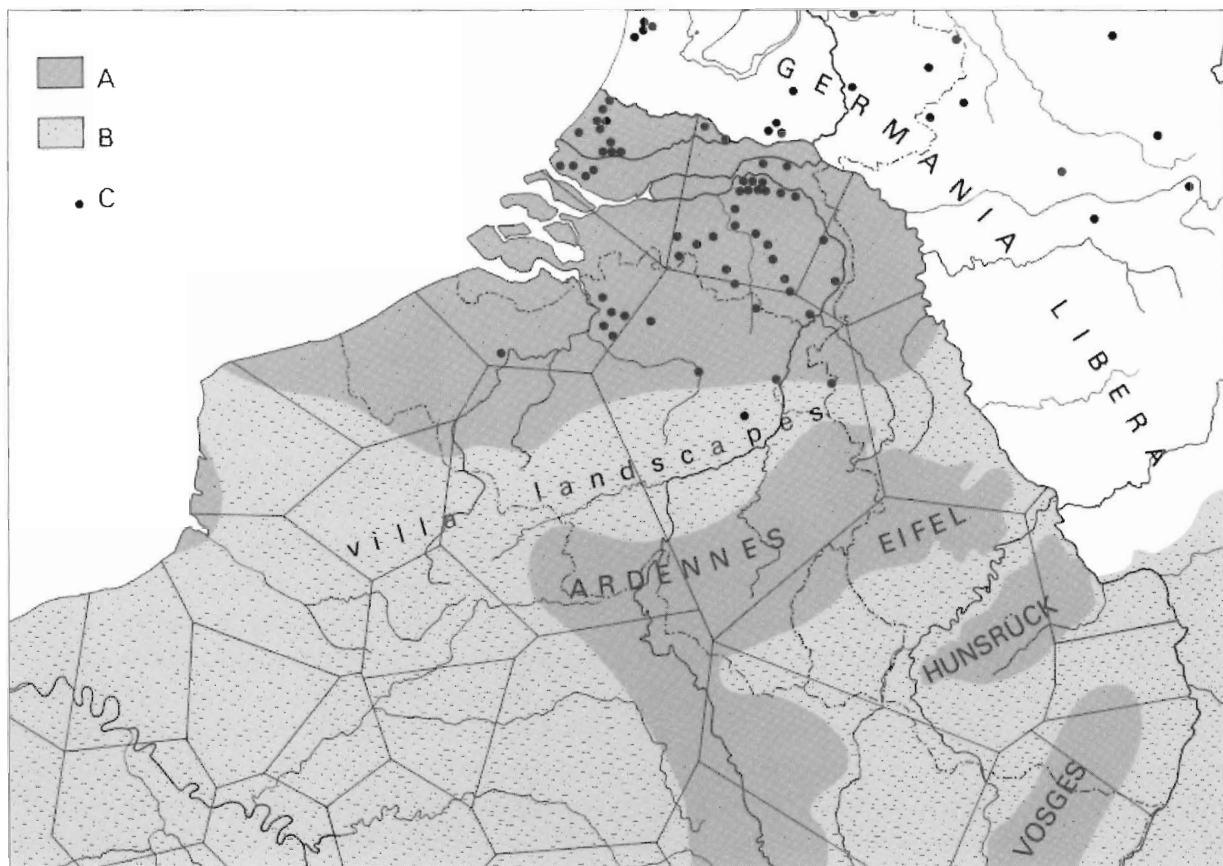


Fig. 1. Roman Hauslandschaften in Northern Gaul. After Roymans 1996, fig. 18. A. Landscapes in which traditional house-types predominate; B. Landscapes in which villae predominate; C. Excavated settlement with plan of a traditional long-house.

1. an upland zone in the east comprising the massifs of the Ardennes, the Hunsrück, the Eifel and the Vosges;
2. a lowland zone in the north, largely covered by Pleistocene coversand and Holocene peat;
3. a zone of Pleistocene loess soils stretching from Northern France into Central Belgium and the German Rhineland.

Though through time in each of these zones mixed farming was the rule, there were obviously differences in the relative importance of agriculture and animal husbandry. With the intensification of agrarian production in the Roman period, these differences were further enhanced and finally led to the emergence of two distinct cultural landscapes, differing from each other in the organization of the landscape, viz. in field and settlement systems and, most clearly to the archaeologist, in house-building traditions. Thus in the loess area the *villa* gradually became the form of rural settlement *par excellence*, while in the lowlands and, as far

as we can tell, also in the uplands, the vernacular farmhouse remained predominant throughout the entire Roman period (fig. 1).

In the *villa*-landscapes crop cultivation was of prime importance. Analysis of palynological remains points to an open landscape with a large amount of arable land mainly used for cereal production (Bun-  
nik 1995). Detailed botanical research of macro-remains from the *villa* of Voerendaal (NL), as well as samplings from some other *villae* in the nearby Rhineland, show a marked specialization on the growing of spelt and bread wheat (Kooistra 1996). Moreover, several excavations of *villae*, among which those at Voerendaal, have produced plans of the typical Roman *horreum* (fig. 2). As the part of the harvest which was to be sold on the market was probably not stored on the production site itself, but in the towns or army camps where it was going to be consumed,<sup>2</sup> these buildings must have been largely used for the storage of seed grain. Their size (with capacities far beyond those of pre-Roman forms of

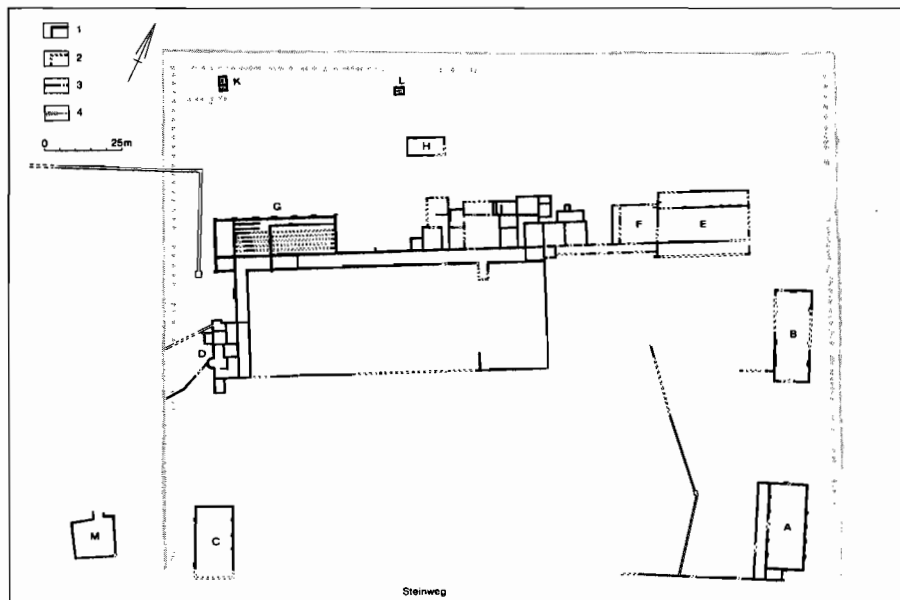


Fig. 2. Simplified plan of the great villa of Voerendaal with the stone foundations from the 2nd and 3rd centuries. After Willems 1988, Abb. 3.

1. Foundations and walls; 2. Idem, not excavated and reconstructed; 3. Supply canal and drain; 4. Ditch around the plot with on the inner side post-holes and tree-planting holes. A. Barn with paved threshing-floor adjoining on the west side (not indicated); G. Horreum.

storage) is indicative of an increasing specialization on the growing of cereals. The fact that such buildings do not occur at rural sites outside the *villa* landscapes supports the view that it was here that crop cultivation was most intense. Finally, the distribution of technical innovations directly linked with the cultivation of cereals, such as the corn-drier and the famous Gallic reaping machine, is also markedly limited to the area of the *villa* landscapes.<sup>3</sup>

If we may conclude from the above that the *villa* landscapes of Northern Gaul were specialized in crop cultivation, animal husbandry being only of secondary importance, the reverse can be argued for the rest of Northern Gaul. As far as the lowlands are concerned, the results of palynological investigations undertaken there point to an open landscape with large areas being used for pasture. Moreover, among the animal bones of the main domestic species collected from excavations of rural settlements in the Lower Rhine Basin, cattle are always the best represented species. With percentages often reaching well above 70%, the importance of cattle breeding in this area is unequalled in the rest of Northern Gaul (Benecke 1994, 143ff.; Lepetz 1996; Roymans 1996, 80f.). Supporting arguments for a specialization on the raising of livestock may also be derived from the persistence of the traditional farmhouse. The unbroken tradition of the vernacular long-house, in which man and cattle were sheltered under a single roof, is indeed a strong

indication for the continued economic and social importance of cattle breeding. A final clue towards a specialization in this direction may be inferred from Tacitus' references to payments of tribute in the form of cattle or hides (*Annales* IV, 72).

Less clear is the situation in the uplands, since for these zones ecological data are still lacking.<sup>4</sup> From a practical point of view, however, it seems unlikely that crop cultivation was really important here. Apart from the complete absence of *villae*, three types of data rather point to the contrary. One is the presence of droveways. In selected parts of the Vosges, these have been identified both by long stretches of low walls bordering the actual tracks (fig. 3), as well as by large funnel-shaped systems of access (Harmand 1984). If we assume that these undated structures are contemporaneous with the hill-top settlements with which they are associated,<sup>5</sup> construction may have begun in the Augustan period. In that case, their appearance may have been related to an intensified use of the 'marginal' uplands for the production of wool, for which, with the establishment of the new civic centres, demands were increasing from exactly the same period onwards. Similar conclusions may be drawn from rare sculptural representations of shepherds such as those on an inscribed tombstone and on a slab of a larger funeral monument found at Mainz and Cologne respectively.<sup>6</sup> They make clear that in the nearby uplands sheep breeding was not restricted to the subsistence farming of some small isolated

Fig. 3. Simplified plan of the dispersed settlement of Haegen-‘Wasserwald’ in the Vosges with its characteristic droveways lined with low stone walls. After Pétry in: Petit & Mangin 1994, 151, fig. 3.



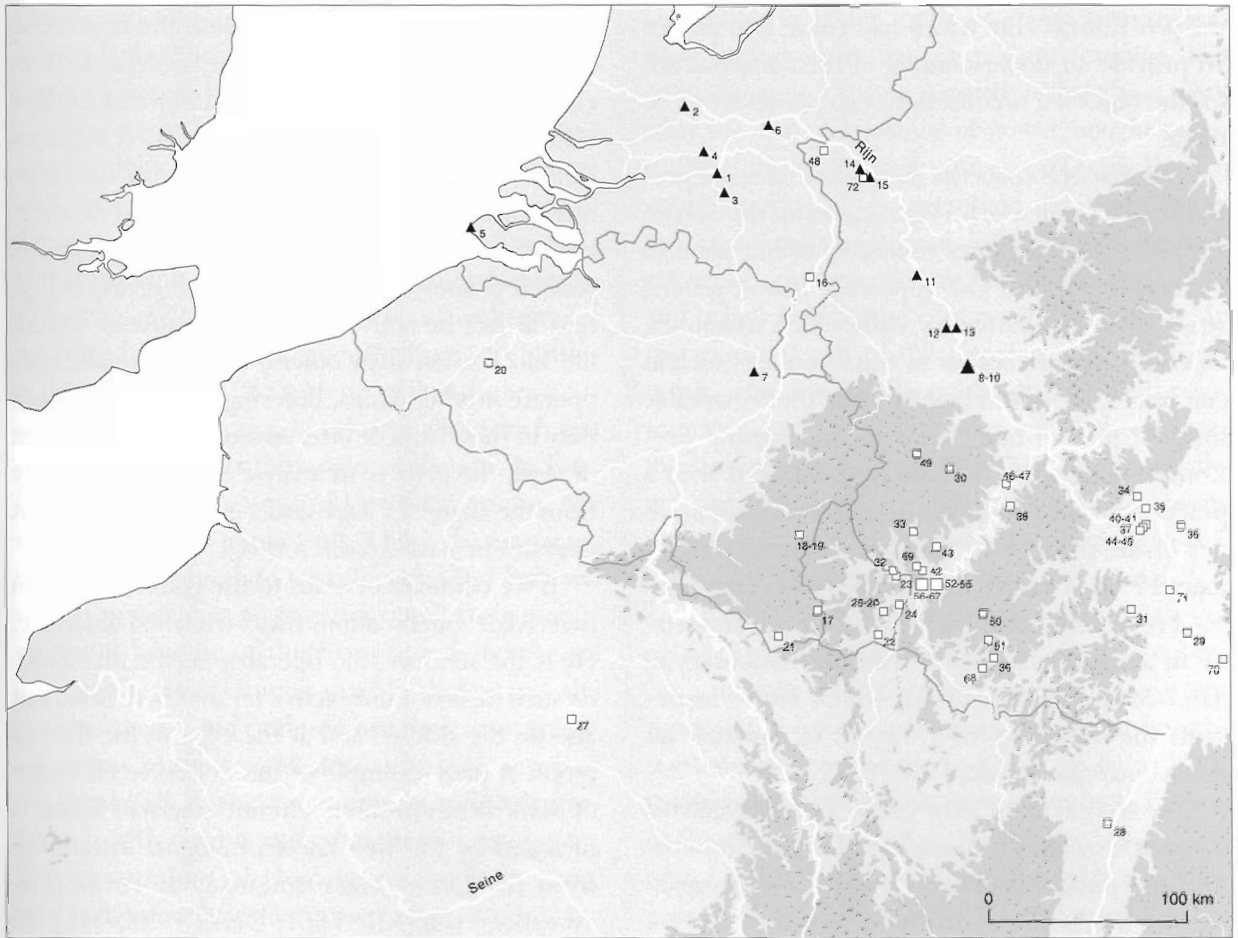
mountain communities of which one tends to think in the first place. Rather, sheep farming was also organized on a large scale by members of the landed nobility, who, according to a model quite well known from Italy, leased contracts to client shepherds and their slaves to tend their flocks.<sup>7</sup> A final argument may be inferred from depictions of wool trade on funeral monuments from the Ardennes, the Hunsrück, and the Moselle valley (Reddé 1978). Comparison of the iconographical representations on the well-preserved monument from Igel with information available for the medieval cloth production of Northwestern Europe has shown that specialized long-distance trade of the magnitude as depicted here presupposes a production of wool and yarn on a scale which far exceeded the possibilities of an individual farm. It not only required cooperation between many farms all specialized in sheep rearing, but perhaps even importation of raw materials from nearby regions (Drinkwater 1977/78).

## Evidence for North Gallic cosmologies

If the above-sketched different ways of life are embedded in different cosmologies, what evidence do we have for them? Since no myths have been hand-

ed down to us, religious inscriptions provide the most detailed information. These were put above all in the context of a Roman-style votive tradition, which in the process of Romanization gradually spread across the area (Derks 1998, 215ff.). Though the texts of such inscriptions are highly formalized and, of course, also lapidary, they may nevertheless provide some important clues. For since as a result of the process of ‘Romanization’, names and myths of local gods were extended with and partially replaced by those of their Mediterranean counterparts, their epigraphically preserved theonyms make it possible to link up the patchy evidence from the North Gallic cults with the rich literary record available for their Mediterranean counterparts.

The association of a local god’s name with that of a Roman counterpart is one of the most frequently discussed examples of Gallo-Roman religious syncretism.<sup>8</sup> The pairing of names has been demonstrated to show particular, consistent patterns. To begin with, a wide variety of local gods is associated with a very small selection from the classical pantheon. Mars and Mercury are most often chosen as counterparts; only incidentally do Apollo, Silvanus and Hercules appear in this role. The associations also appear to be limited in that a local god is always linked with one and the same Roman god. Moreover, a marked regional differentiation may be observed in the spatial distribution of votive inscriptions in which the names of Hercules and Mars are



▲▲ A      □□ B

Fig. 4. Find-spots of votive inscriptions to originally indigenous gods associated with Hercules or Mars. After Derks 1998, fig. 3.5; for lists of find-spots and references to the inscriptions, see Derks 1998, appendices 3.1 & 3.2. A. Dedications to Hercules; B. Dedications to Mars (larger symbol: more than two inscriptions).

paired with that of a local god. While Hercules occurs only in the northern half of the research area, the distribution of Mars associations is virtually limited to the southern half (fig. 4).

How are we to explain these patterns? One explanation, which recently has been suggested, is appropriation of local gods by Roman authorities (Millett 1995; Webster 1997). Roman interpretations of the local panthea indeed contributed to the process of syncretization. In our area this is exemplified by the dedication of a Roman consul and his wife in the important sanctuary of Mars Leucetius and Nemetona at Ober-Olm near Mainz (*CIL* XIII 7253).

But such appropriation by representatives of the intruding power seems to have happened inci-

dentally rather than as part of a determined imperial policy aimed at a systematic Romanization of long-established local cults. As long as public order was not threatened, Rome did not seek any interference with the religious life of her subjects. While it may be admitted that choices were made in dialogue with representatives of the Roman army or Roman provincial administration, in my opinion the limited variation in Roman counterparts together with the regional differences in the distribution rather suggest a careful selection originating from a native perception of the Roman pantheon.<sup>9</sup> I assume that the association of names (and the interweaving of myths which must have accompanied it) was made for the first time shortly after the Roman conquest, namely by members of

the pro-Roman elite which had come into power. To provide an understanding of their motivations for the observed predilection, two points are to be made.

The first one concerns the central values of pre-Roman society, in which a high esteem for the warrior status and the adventures connected with it seem to be most important. This appears in a most general sense from the frequency with which weaponry, especially swords, appear in ritual contexts such as cult places, rivers and burials. Also, the remarkable finds of human bone material from some pre-Roman sanctuaries, tentatively associated with a practice to vow part of the booty to the community's divine protectors, could be cited here (Brunaux 1995). Finally, we could refer to rare sculptural representations such as the bronze statuette of an armour-clad figure from the sanctuary at Saint-Maur (F, dep. Oise), which either represents the self-image of a warrior or portrays his divine example (Derks 1998, fig. 2.5).<sup>0</sup>

The second point to be made is that the cults of the gods associated with Mars or Hercules presumably had a public character. These cults were organized by the local authorities on behalf of and for the benefit of the entire community, viz. the *civitas* or the *pagus*. This becomes clear from the involvement of priests and magistrates, from the monumentality of the sanctuaries associated with them, and from the regional rather than local distribution of their votive inscriptions. Against the background of these two points, the choice for Mars or Hercules seems no more than logical: each of these two Roman divinities was patently associated by the Roman army with martial capacities, and as such they were perfectly suited to a role as protectors of the community at large.

## Farm life and cosmology

If in the foregoing we were able to explain the precise choice of Mars and Hercules, the question of why in one *civitas* Mars and in another Hercules was chosen, was left untouched. Before embarking upon answering this specific question, I have to introduce the work of the French historian of religion Georges Dumézil. Confronted with the problems of the traditional functionalist perspective, in

which each god was thought to be active in just one specialized field (e.g. Mars on the battlefield, Mercury in matters of trade, etc.) and in which all 'deviations' from the model were explained in terms of either secondary roles or historical developments, Dumézil (1996, 205ff.) developed an alternative view which appeared to be of great help. Its general proposition is that, while all divine beings may in fact be active in some domains of human life more often than others, they potentially may operate in *all* domains, differing from one another only in their ways of intervention. From this point of view, the crux is to analyse a divinity's activity from the angle of a *single modus agendi* from which it operates in *many different* settings.

If we confine ourselves to the gods in question here, Mars' interventions may be termed defensive. He is the sentinel who operates on the threshold. As such he is not only active on the battlefield, but also on the sickbed and at the edge of the field of crops. A prize example of the defensive character of Mars' intervention in circumstances of illness is provided by the well-known bilingual inscription from the Lenus Mars sanctuary at Pommern-'Martberg' (CIL XIII 7661; Derks 1998, 79f.). In the Latin text the dedicator is considered 'saved by the divine love of Mars while he was balancing on the *brink* of death'; the Greek version states that he 'prayed to Lenus to *dispel* the terrible pains of his illness; after his *rescue* he dedicated this gift to the mighty Ares'. The choice of words let there be no misunderstanding that the role of Mars in this particular field is conceptualized in complete analogy with his well-known role on the battlefield.

For Mars' interventions in agrarian affairs, the famous passage from Cato's *De agricultura* is instructive (*De agr.* 141). Here the farmer receives the advice to implore the god with the offering of sacrificial animals led around the estate 'to *obstruct*, *drive back* and *ward off* visible and invisible plagues, infertility and destruction, disasters and storms'.<sup>10</sup> The choice of words makes it perfectly clear yet again that it is his protective power rather than some presupposed regenerative capacities for which he is invoked. Moreover, though in theory Mars may also watch over herds or rather individual animals, it should be stressed that the most important rituals which in the classical sources were associated with Mars' interventions in agrarian matters always pre-



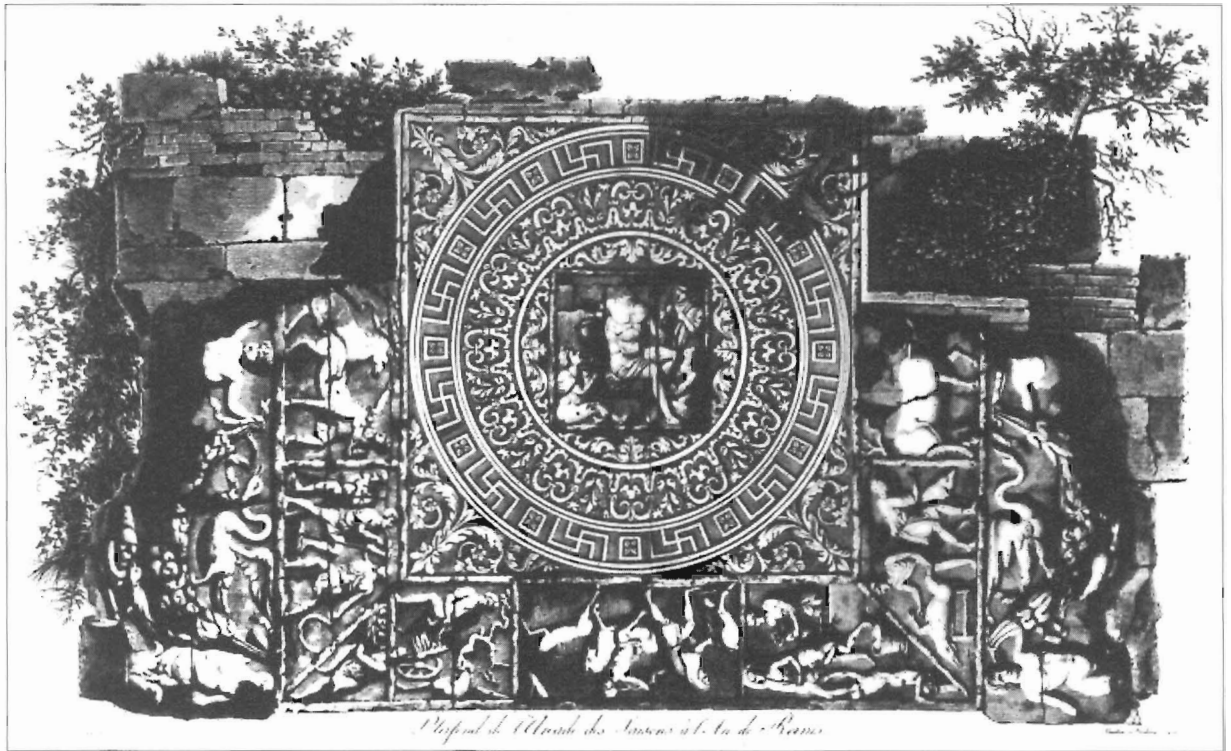


Fig. 5. Eighteenth century engraving reproducing the reliefs in the central soffit of the Porta Martis in Reims. Drawing by Bence, first published in A. de Laborde, 1816-36: *Monuments de la France*. Paris, pl. CXIII, here reproduced after Lefèvre & Legros 1985, pl. XVIII. The name-giving god is to be recognized in the enthroned, half-naked male figure in the centre of the central panel. He is accompanied by four putti representing the four seasons, two of which are crouched at his feet while two others stood beside him. The whole is framed by a series of originally twelve agricultural scenes from the Remian territory (amongst which, bottom left, the harvest of corn by means of the Gallic reaping machine) referring to the twelve months of the year (Stern 1962).

Hercules here too. At this point it is important to bear in mind that, politically, the mountainous zones were found in various *civitates* which all had their administrative centres based in a *villa* landscape. Hence the official public cult on the *civitas* level was focused here on Mars, as we know it was indeed in the case of Trier. This, however, did not prevent the mountain dwellers in the periphery of these districts from organizing their own private cults in honour of Hercules. And indeed such sanctuaries did exist both in the Eifel and in the Vosges (Binsfeld 1987; Moitrieux 1992).<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

Summing up, in Northern Gaul two different cultural landscapes gradually emerged. Though it may be argued that the observed distinctions between the two were clearly related with different economic

realities, they also implied different ways of life, different world-views, and different divine orders. This is exemplified by different appropriations of the mythical heritage of Rome, as well as by different choices of location for sanctuaries. While the owner of the *villa*-estate specialized in arable farming had his private temple in honour of Mars erected on the boundary of his estate, the herdsmen sought help from Hercules at the nodal points in their circuits. As is shown by these examples, the cultural landscapes of Roman Gaul were, far from simply reflecting different possibilities of the landscape, also the product of different mental templates referring to different divine orders.

## Notes

1. This paper largely derives from my doctoral dissertation (Derks 1998). Additional research was carried out when I was appointed as a post-doc by the Netherlands School of



Archaeological Research (Archon) and the University of Amsterdam. I would like to thank the organizers of the conference for the invitation to contribute to this volume.

2. This may be guessed from the presence of significantly larger granaries in or near these urban and military centres. Cf., for example, the *horrea* of Roman Cologne situated on the isle in the Rhine off the town (Horn 1987, 467f., Abb. 396) or those in the legionary fort of the Roman army at Bonn (Horn 1987, 375, Abb. 317 & 320).
3. For the corn-driers, see Van Ossel 1992, 140; for the harvesting machine, see the excellent discussion by White 1967a, xi-xii, 157-73, pl. 13-16 (with photographs), and especially *idem* 1967b. To the evidence presented by White can now be added a fragment of a funeral monument with a representation of the *vallus* dredged up in 1969 from the Moselle river at Koblenz (Ardhuin 1983, 10, with photograph). For a photograph of the Reims *vallus*, see Lefèvre/Legros 1985, pl. XV.
4. Cf. however Pétry 1977, 148, who, referring to investigations by Poulain and Jourdan on the small collections of animal bone preserved from Gallo-Roman settlements in the Vosges, states that sheep and goat were predominant there. To my knowledge, the results still await publication.
5. The exact nature of these settlements is under discussion. It is unclear whether the excavated farmsteads should be interpreted as signs of permanent habitation by small mountain communities, as I argued on the base of the presence of cemeteries and a sanctuary (cf. Derks 1998, 64, n. 164), or rather should be considered as the remains of seasonal occupation by small groups of shepherds practising short-distance transhumance, as was guessed by Von Petrikovits (1977, 121) and argued by Harmand (1984).
6. *CIL* XIII 7070 with unequivocal reference to the patron-client status of the relationship between shepherd and landlord, and Drinkwater 1977/78, note 44 with further references.
7. For similar suggestions with regard to the social organization of sheep-breeding in the Vosges, see Harmand 1984, 212; for the leasing of contracts to shepherds in an Italian context of transhumance, Corbier 1983. As some inscribed border stones suggest (cf. *CIL* XIII 11645-6), part of the pasture land in the Vosges must have been common land.
8. Zoll 1994; Webster 1997; Derks 1998, 94ff.
9. Derks 1998, 91ff. Partially, this selection is due to what the Roman army had to offer, which in turn was only a part of the whole array of cults which existed in Rome. Cf. below, note 11.
10. The Latin text reads: (*uti tu*) *prohibebis, defendas* and *averunces*.
11. For an idea of the various ways in which, according to Roman conceptions, some other gods and goddesses could help in agricultural farming, see Scheid 1990, 711f.
12. Van Wonterghem 1992; Coarelli 1992, 261f.; Coarelli & La Regina 1993, 84-87, 217f.; Gros 1995 with the relevant older literature. For *fora pecuaria*, sheep mar-

kets, see also *CIL* X 5074 (Atina) and 5850 (Ferentinum) with Coarelli 1996. Gros' re-interpretation of the Glanum sanctuary has recently been contested by Congès (1997), but is confirmed by a new reading of the architectural remains of the Hercules sanctuary at Tivoli. See for this, the contribution by Jacopo Bonetto to be published in the Proceedings of the XV<sup>th</sup> international congress of classical archaeology, held at Amsterdam 1998.

13. See, on this point, the discussion with Scheid in Derks 1997, 151, 157.
14. Though in the Lower Rhine area transhumance was of course out of the question, the story of the theft of Geryon's cattle seems to have appealed no less to the imagination there, as is suggested by its depiction on the reverse side of a coin issued by Postumus (Elmer 1941, Taf. 7,6), the Gallic usurper who is often supposed to have been of Batavian origin. Like many Mediterranean communities who boasted to have welcomed Hercules with the stolen cattle on his way back to Eurystheus, the Batavians may have invented a version in which the hero with his herds had ended up in their home-land and had left them the breed which they held in such high esteem.
15. Other decorations of the monument referring to the mythical past of the Remi helped to define the prosperity conveyed by the size, shape and decoration of the arch more closely in time and space. See the discussion in Derks 1998, 105ff.
16. For the Eifel sanctuary, the identification is based upon sculptural remains of a stone Hercules figure, now lost, and a stone club probably belonging to that. For the Vosges sanctuary, the evidence consists of a series of votive reliefs with depictions of the hero. Some of these had inscriptions in which the hero is invoked under his single Roman name. In view of what has been said about the social organization of sheep-breeding, it may be relevant to note here that most dedicators of these monuments bore simple names rather than the *tria* or *duo nomina* characteristic of Roman citizens. This may confirm the idea that the sanctuary was visited first and foremost by shepherds and their assistants, who generally were of humble birth (cf. *CIL* XIII 7070 and above, note 6).

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