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Feeding the frontier. Agricultural economies, productive potential, and predictive modelling

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Session Abstract: The provisioning of the army and the role of the local population in supplying food has already been the subject of discussion for decades. For a long time, historical sources and the marginal landscape have led to the assumption that the Roman army in the Rhine delta (for example) was mainly supplied with products transported over medium and long distances. In the past twenty years, a large number of agrarian settlements and in addition, several army camps both situated in the Rhine delta have been investigated. Research combining archaeological, archaeobotanical, zooarchaeological, geomorphological and historical data has shed new light upon the way the provisioning of the Roman army in this area was organized. In addition to the traditional research method of data compilation, there has been recent focus on quantitative modelling and agent-based modelling in this area over the past 10 years.

The collation of datasets generated by developer-funded excavations, especially in North-East Gaul and central-southern Britain, have demonstrated that agricultural communities in regions further from the frontiers were orientated towards supplying the Roman army. The application of multi-isotope techniques has provided new insights into the sourcing of animals and crops and the husbandry systems under which they were produced. Meanwhile, increased study of archaeobotanical and faunal assemblages in the Danube region, Noricum, Pannonia, and the Middle East are providing new insights into food supply and allow broader comparison of frontier supply systems in different parts of the Roman Empire.

We would like to invite colleagues to share their researches concerning feeding the Roman army at the borders of the Roman Empire in our session.