

WHAT WAS THE ROMAN LIMES?

I have always been interested in the history of the ancient Roman Empire and its military expansion into Western Europe especially into Germany, France and England. At its maximum military expansion during the reign of Trajan (98-117AD) it controlled a huge area of conquered land extending counterclockwise from England to Spain to North Africa, to Egypt, to Jordan, to the Black Sea, to the Balkans, and to Southern Germany. Here is a map of the Empire at its maximum extent-

THE ROMAN EMPIRE AT ITS MAXIMUM EXTENT IN 117AD UNDER TRAJAN



source- Ancient History Encyclopedia

The Romans were able to conquer all this land with an army of only about a quarter million men consisting of some fifty legions of approximately 5000 soldiers each. This army was aided by mercenaries from the conquered countries. One of the most difficult areas to hold was the region to the right of the Rhine and north of the Danube in present day Germany. Early attempts of a conquest of the Barbarians in central and north Germany met with disaster including the complete annihilation of three Roman Legions under Varus by Arminius(Hermann) at the Battle of the Teutoburg Forerst in 9AD. Although the Romans had later victories in these German held lands, they found it more practical to stay mostly west of the Rhine and south of the Danube. To hold onto the conquered lands between Cologne on the Rhine and Regensburg on the Danube they decided to build a 500km long defensive wall between Cologne(Colonia) and Regensburg (Castrum Regina). This wall became known as the **Limes Germanicus**. It was heavily fortified by forts spread evenly along its length. Mainz (Moguntiacum) on the Rhine and Regensburg on the Danube were the two legion headquarters responsible for defense along the entire southern Limes. The Roman province directly south of the Limes was known as Raetia(modern day Bavaria) and that to the south-west as Germania Superior. (An excellent museum depicting life of Roman settlers in Raetia can be found at Neuburg along the Danube) . Here is a map of the

Limes showing its hundred or so forts plus the two major legion headquarters at Mainz and Regensburg-

ROMAN LIMES BETWEEN THE RHEIN AND DANUBE RIVERS



Most of the towns shown listed in the graph are today relatively unknown, so I give you another map I constructed indicating the location of some of the larger modern cities lying along or near the former location of the Limes-

APPROXIMATE LOCATION OF THE ROMAN LIMES SHOWN AS A RED LINE



Strategically the Limes was placed to protect the Roman conquests as they stood in 70 AD. However a better and shorter Limes requiring less manpower would have been to connect Mainz and Regensburg directly by a straight line of wall and forts. It would have involved giving up the triangle of land between Cologne-Frankfurt and Mainz and conquering the section above Stuttgart up to the new Limes line. Apparently this was not deemed possible in view of the Roman's long term memory of the Teutoburg Forest debacle 80 years earlier.

The Limes itself consisted of a dug ditch used to construct a build-up berm which sometimes had a stone wall placed on top and at other times had stakes emplaced. Directly behind the berm there was a watchtower and further back a military fort. The towers and forts were placed at about 5km intervals along the Limes to allow for rapid communication with legion headquarters in the event of a local invasion. Here is a picture of a typical reconstructed Roman watch tower and fort along the Limes-

RECONSTRUCTED WATCHTOWER AND FORT ALONG THE LIMES



To get a better feel for life along the Limes I refer you to the 1964 movie “Fall of the Roman Empire” with Alec Guinness as Marcus Aurelius. It shows several rather dreary winter scenes along the wall.

The Limes was an effective defense structure from about 83AD through about 260 AD when the pressure by the invading Barbarians became so great that the Romans had to retreat to the south and west. Mainz was sacked by northern invaders in 368 AD and the Roman fortress at Regensburg was abandoned in the late 4th century AD shortly before the sacking of Rome by Alaric and his Visigoths in 410AD.

Like all walls (including the Great Wall of China and Hadrian’s Wall) they were intended to keep out foreign invaders. They all eventually failed due mainly to internal corruption, inflation, and food shortages in the occupier’s provinces making it impossible to maintain an effective army. The Limes was over-run by northern Barbarians under pressure from eastern invaders, for Hadrian’s Wall it was pressure from the Caledonians (Scots) , and for China it was the Mongols who overwhelmed the Chinese defenders.

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