

THE *LIMES* AND HADRIAN'S WALL

Rome's Northern European Boundaries

BY PETER S. WELLS

Hadrian's Wall at Housesteads, looking east. Here the wall forms the northern edge of the Roman fort (the grass to the right is within the fort's interior). In the background the wall extends northeastward, away from the fort.

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EVERY WALL DEMANDS attention and raises questions. Who built it and why? The *Limes* in southern Germany and Hadrian's Wall in northern Britain are the most distinctive physical remains of the northern expansion and defense of the Roman Empire. Particularly striking are the size of these monuments today and their uninterrupted courses through the countryside. The *Limes*, the largest archaeological monument in Europe, extends 550 km (342 miles) across southern Germany, connecting the Roman frontiers on the middle Rhine and upper Danube Rivers. It runs through farmland, forests, villages, and towns, and up onto the heights of the Taunus and Wetterau hills. Hadrian's Wall is 117 km (73 miles) long, crossing the northern part of England from the Irish Sea to the North Sea. While portions of Hadrian's Wall run through urban Newcastle and Carlisle, its central courses traverse open landscapes removed from modern settlements.

The frontiers of the Roman Empire in northwestern Europe in the period AD 120–250. For a brief period around AD 138–160, Roman forces in Britain established and maintained a boundary farther north, the Antonine Wall. The frontier zones, indicated here by oblique hatching, are regions in which intensive interaction took place between the Roman provinces and other European peoples. Names of Roman provinces are included, as are those of several modern cities that were established as Roman military bases and civilian settlements (larger type), as well as other places mentioned in the text (smaller type).





The *Limes* in southern Germany, showing remains of a stone tower (in the distance) associated with the defenses.

We can see ruins of stone-built structures (in some cases partially restored today) along both walls. Created during what is known as the Early Roman Period, both walls slice through the countryside, seemingly undeterred by obstacles that earlier Iron Age builders and later medieval builders avoided. For example, one stretch of the *Limes*, between Walldürn and Welzheim, is straight over a distance of 80 km (50 miles).

Even if we did not know the historical background to these walls, their monumentality would make apparent that each had been constructed under the direction of a powerful central authority commanding vast amounts of labor and resources. As such, the *Limes* and Hadrian's Wall belong to a series of very large ancient walls that includes the Great Wall of China, Offa's Dyke between England and Wales, and the

Danevirke in northern Germany. All required enormous efforts to construct and maintain, and thus imply powerful states that commanded their creation. These great physical monuments never disappeared from their landscapes, as did so many other ancient structures.

THE CREATION OF THE WALLS

The two walls were built at roughly the same time, though their precise chronologies are extremely complex because they were constructed in phases over a number of decades. Roman armies under Julius Caesar conquered Gaul (modern France and lands farther to the northeast) between 58 and 51 BC, making the Rhine River the eastern boundary of Roman



The Danube River at Regensburg. The Danube remained the boundary between Roman territory and the unconquered lands from 15 BC until the collapse of the Empire during the 5th century AD. The 12th century medieval bridge in this photograph links Regensburg (left) with the north bank of the river.

THE *LIMES* IN HISTORY AND MYTH

The Latin word *limes* originally designated a way or a road, typically between fields or territories. Over time it came to be applied not only to roads that ran along Roman frontiers, but also to defensive works associated with them. The first-known historical use of the term to refer to a military boundary was by the Roman historian Tacitus in chapter 29 of *Germania*, written about AD 98. Today, *Limes* refers specifically to the wall and ditch that Rome maintained between the middle Rhine and the upper Danube.

In medieval and early modern times, people who lived near the *Limes* created stories to account for it. For example, in Bavaria it is still labeled *Teufelsmauer* ("Devil's Wall") on many maps. According to one legend, the Devil arranged to buy a piece of land from God, and it was to be as large an area as he could enclose with a ditch or a wall in the course of one night. When God agreed, the Devil turned into a pig and began to rout furiously with his snout, plowing a ditch and throwing the soil up on the sides—hence today's term *Schweinsgraben* ("Pig's Ditch") for the ditch alongside the *Teufelsmauer*. But before the Devil had finished, a cock crowed, announcing the arrival of morning. The Devil had tried to enclose too much land and failed to complete his task. The earthworks visible today are remains of this unsuccessful effort.



Between Caesar's conquest of Gaul (58–51 BC) and the construction of the Limes boundary (AD 120s), the natural rugged topography of the middle Rhine valley formed a barrier to major movements by potential raiders into Roman territory. This view shows typical middle Rhineland topography on the eastern bank at St. Goarshausen, with the later medieval castle, Burg Katz, on the slope.



The walls of the fortification at Regensburg were built of unusually large stone blocks. This view shows the southeast corner of the Roman fort, excavated in the 1950s and 1960s. The medieval wall in the foreground, of smaller stones, dates to around AD 1383.

territory north of the Alps. In 15 BC, legions led by Tiberius and Drusus conquered the lands south of the Danube River in what is now southern Bavaria, making the Rhine and the Danube the frontiers of the Roman Empire in northwestern Europe. Shortly after the conquest, the Roman military began constructing bases along the Danube. Regensburg became the largest and remained the principal Roman military and civil center of the region until the 5th century AD. In the AD 80s under the Emperor Domitian, the triangle of land between the upper Rhine and upper Danube was added to Roman terri-



Hadrian's Wall at Black Carts, view looking east from just north of the wall. The level berm is visible in the center, the outer ditch at the left.

tory, and in succeeding decades a frontier line was laid out to enclose that land. A linear boundary between the Rhine and the Danube was apparently first closed under the Emperor Hadrian in the AD 120s, along the line shown on the map.

In its fully developed form, the *Limes* in Germania superior consisted of a palisade of oak trunks on the outside, then a ditch some 8 m wide and 2.5 m deep, followed by an earth bank over 2 m high, then a road, along which watchtowers stood. In Raetia, the fully developed *Limes* included a stone wall some 3 m high with watchtowers behind or on the wall.

Turning to Britain, Roman legions under the Emperor Claudius conquered most of it in about four years starting in AD 43. Around the end of the 1st century AD, a linear boundary with a road now known as the Stanegate was laid out just south of the later Hadrian's Wall. In the AD 120s and 130s, Hadrian's Wall as we know it today was constructed. In its completed form it consisted of an outer bank, an outer ditch, a level berm, a stone wall perhaps as high as 6.5 m, a road, an inner bank, an inner ditch (known as the *vallum*), and another bank. This whole defensive complex was up to 120 m wide.

Research excavations continue to sort out the building histories of both the *Limes* and Hadrian's Wall. Unfortunately, excavated portions often yield no chronologically diagnostic remains, making dating of the structural phases difficult.

THE PURPOSE OF THE WALLS

The purpose of these two walls has been the subject of much debate. Were they meant to be fortifications from which Romans would battle potential invaders? Or were they

THE WALLS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROVINCIAL ROMAN ARCHAEOLOGY

The *Limes* and Hadrian's Wall played critical roles in the development of scholarly understanding of the Roman Empire's provinces in Europe. Beginning in 1518–19 Johannes Turmair, known as Aventinus, observed and described the *Limes* wall and ditch and correctly attributed them to the Roman occupation of southern Germany. Similarly, in 1531, Beatus Rhenanus noted abundant wall remains around the town of Aalen. These also formed part of the *Limes* or of a Roman fort situated just south of it. During the 18th and 19th centuries, systematic investigations were carried out on different parts of the *Limes*, making people aware of its significance and generating concern for its preservation. One account, from 1780, notes that the wall stood to a substantial height in places but that locals were removing quantities of stones. As historical interest grew during the 19th century, Maximilian II, King of Bavaria, erected a series of inscribed markers along the *Limes*. Finally, in 1892, largely through the efforts of the Roman historian Theodor Mommsen, the Reichslimeskommission (“Imperial *Limes* Commission”) was established to coordinate research on different parts of the *Limes* system.

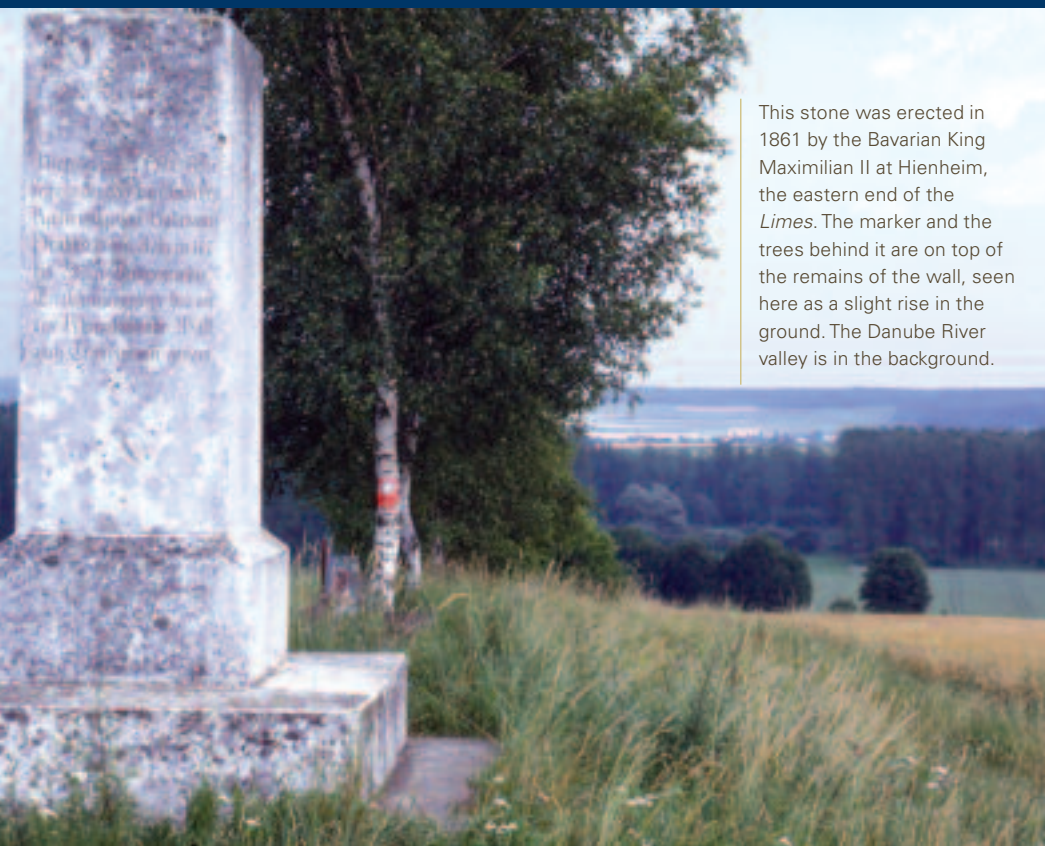
Hadrian's Wall also attracted attention early. In the fifth edition of William Camden's *Britannia*, published in 1600, he described his pedestrian survey of the wall and offered ideas about its construction. This was followed in 1732 by a detailed section drawing through the complex in John Horsley's *Britannia Romana* and, in 1776, by drawings of the wall in its surroundings in William Stukeley's posthumously published *Iter Boreale*. By 1851, John Collingwood Bruce's *Handbook to the Roman Wall* was published, a standard reference work that has been reissued in numerous editions. Vast amounts of information about the wall were published throughout the 20th century and a number of regional journals have carried annual reports on the progress of research.

In both Germany and Britain, studies of these walls and of the forts associated with them played major roles in the development of the field of provincial Roman archaeology. Much of what we know about the Roman military derives from excavations at installations along the *Limes* and Hadrian's Wall. Some 120 fortresses have been identified along the *Limes* in Germany, along with about 900 watchtowers, each within sight of its two neighbors. Along Hadrian's Wall, some 60 small forts (“milecastles”) have been located at intervals of one Roman mile (slightly less than a modern mile); two watchtowers stood between every two forts. Around 20,000 troops—mostly auxiliaries (recruits from the provinces, not legionaries who were

Roman citizens)—are believed to have been stationed in the forts and watchtowers along the *Limes*, around 10,000 on Hadrian's Wall. Civilian settlements grew up near many of the bases. In the relatively few cases where these settlements and their cemeteries have been systematically excavated, archaeologists have been able to learn much about interactions between the Roman military and native peoples of the region.



Reconstructed watchtower along the *Limes* at Hienheim, 26 km upstream from Regensburg on the Danube.



This stone was erected in 1861 by the Bavarian King Maximilian II at Hienheim, the eastern end of the *Limes*. The marker and the trees behind it are on top of the remains of the wall, seen here as a slight rise in the ground. The Danube River valley is in the background.

move across the frontiers, and the system of gates and nearby forts provided means for the troops to control such passage.

The role of the *Limes* and Hadrian's Wall as monuments to Roman power should not be underestimated. Surrounded as we are today by monumental architecture—skyscrapers, enormous bridges, and great cathedrals—these Roman walls may not strike us as unusually grand. But in the northwestern European landscape of the first centuries AD, they were very impressive. No other structures extended for such distances or cut such remarkable swaths through the countryside. These walls were material manifestations of the central message that Rome wanted to communicate to the peoples beyond its provinces—Rome's power is not threatened by barbarians across its frontiers.



Hadrian's Wall crosses three rivers. Remains of the wall and bridge are visible at the Roman fort at Chesters where it crosses the River Tyne.

linear demarcations of the boundaries of the Empire? Scholarly opinion now favors the latter interpretation and sees the motivation behind constructing them as Hadrian's concern with establishing clear frontier lines between Roman territory and the peoples beyond. At the same time, the walls served to monitor and control movement across the frontier. Gates in the walls make it apparent that passage through was a regular occurrence, and it was never Roman policy to keep people out altogether. Merchants and other travelers needed to be able to

The *Limes* was maintained for about a century and a quarter, until Rome withdrew back to the upper Rhine and Danube after AD 260. Hadrian's Wall served its purpose for three centuries, until the final disintegration of Roman power in Britain after AD 410.

THE WALLS AS LINKS TO THE PAST

Both the *Limes* and Hadrian's Wall have been foci of concerted preservation efforts for well over a century by a variety of governmental agencies in their respective countries. In recent years, both have been extensively developed as tourist attractions, creating stresses and conflicts between the interests of preservation and those of public access. As immense linear structures, they differ from other prominent physical remains of the Roman presence in northern Europe, such as the self-contained Porta Nigra at Trier and Fishbourne Palace in southern England. The visitor to the walls has a different experience from that of viewing Roman ruins in a modern city such as Cologne, Regensburg, or York. When we see the mosaic floor from a Roman villa beneath the Römisch-Germanisches Museum in Cologne, or a reconstructed Roman dining room at the Museum of London, it is relatively easy to imagine what a wealthy city-dweller's house

WORLD HERITAGE SITES

Hadrian's Wall was named a World Heritage Site in 1987. This designation means that a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) committee has judged it to be of "outstanding universal value" as a site of exceptional cultural importance. The nomination process is complex and requires lengthy preparation of reports and plans by governmental agencies. Cultural officials in the four German states through which the *Limes* runs—Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, Hesse, and the Rhineland-Palatinate—have spent the past three years preparing papers for its nomination, with the hope that the *Limes* will win the World Heritage Site designation in 2005.

was like. But at the *Limes* and Hadrian's Wall, we can examine only a small portion of each immense structure at one time. The fact that neither corresponds to any modern political border adds to the sense of their antiquity—they belong to a different world from ours. While reconstructions of Roman buildings and displays of tools, weapons, and jewelry, along with films and television programs about the period, often suggest that the Roman world was not very different from ours, encountering the two great walls can make a visitor feel that the Roman world was unlike anything we know today.

Local governments and tourist bureaus promote the *Limes* and Hadrian's Wall and make them accessible. A German *Limes* Route allows the visitor to follow the course of the *Limes* along a marked 700-km tour from the Rhine to the Danube. Reconstructed portions of the *Limes* system, partially restored remains, and museums are well labeled. Nature trails in the hilly western portion of the *Limes* allow the visitor to enjoy natural and human history together, and a cycle trail enables the bicycle enthusiast to follow the course of the *Limes*. Roman-themed guided tours, special exhibitions, and festivals illuminate visits. Maps and guidebooks designed for all levels of popular and scholarly interest are available. Similarly at Hadrian's Wall, well-marked routes direct the visitor to especially interesting portions of the system, and numerous maps, brochures, and guidebooks help to orient and explain. A Hadrian's Wall Path leads the enterprising hiker along the entire course. Excavated and partially restored sites and well-arranged museums provide the visitor with a rich variety of materials pertaining to the Roman presence.

In the world of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, in which national boundaries change with great social and economic turmoil, and regional cultural and political identities are forged and contested, these two-millennia-old walls across the landscapes of southern Germany and northern Britain can help us to put modern events and challenges into meaningful long-term perspective. 🏠

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Acknowledgments

Bernd Engelhardt, Director of the Landshut office of the Bayerisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege, and Richard Hingley of the Department of Archaeology at the University of Durham provided helpful information and generous hospitality in connection with my preparation of this article. Simon James of the Department of Archaeology of the University of Leicester sent me a copy of his important recent paper cited below. James Mathieu and two anonymous reviewers provided helpful suggestions on an earlier version of this article. I thank all of these colleagues for their assistance.

For Further Reading

The books by Baatz and Breeze are guides to the walls, with excellent maps and descriptions of particularly well-preserved portions. The websites <http://www.limesstrasse.de/> and <http://www.hadrians-wall.org/> provide the potential visitor with numerous links to detailed information about places to visit, paths, visitor's centers, and museums.

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