THE ROMAN FRONTIER ON THE RIVER RHINE: THE ROLE OF MUSEUMS IN REVITALIZING AN HISTORICAL LANDSCAPE

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In the spring of 2015 the board of ICOM Netherlands debated the question what the Dutch contribution to the General Conference in Milan, a year later, should be. The theme, Museums and Cultural Landscapes, defined the direction clearly. The board strove for a complete session with an attractive and current topic. The flat landscape below the sea level, reclaimed with the help of windmills, was too obvious. The river landscape seemed to be better. The Dutch poet Hendrik Marsman described the scenery in the 1930s: “Thinking of Holland I see broad rivers, flowing slowly through endless lowlands” (“Denkend aan Holland zie ik breede rivieren traag door een oneindig laagland gaan”). The delta of the rivers Rhine and Meuse has dominated the Netherlands for ages and largely shaped the country. Two thousand years ago the Romans occupied this region and made the water part of their defense system: the Limes.

Making this historical element visible for inhabitants and tourists alike, is a challenging task for museums, large and small. This endeavor is highly topical in view of the nomination of the Lower Germanic Limes, the Roman frontier on the Rhine, as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The nomination has been applied by the Dutch government supported by the German states North Rhine Westphalia and Rhineland Palatinate.

The proposal was accepted and ICOM Netherlands organized a session on the topic of the Limes at the General Conference, together with other ICOM and ICOM-related organizations. In this paper I will describe the nature of the Lower Germanic Limes, deal with the nomination procedure and the role of museums in this process and give a short report of the session in Milan. A more elaborate report of the session has been submitted to Museum International. The full papers will be published on-line by ICOM Netherlands in 2017.

The Roman Limes in Germany and the Netherlands

Roman soldiers entered territories that now belong to the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Federal Republic of Germany during the wars of Julius Caesar around 50 BC. In the times of Emperor Augustus further expansion northward and eastward was planned. However, resistance was strong and the rewards of conquering the lands between Rhine and Elbe did not seem promising enough. The Romans decided to strengthen their northern border along the natural frontiers Rhine and
Danube. In between the two rivers they built a wall over land, in their provinces *Germania Superior* and *Rhaethia*. Therefore, this line is now known as Upper Germanic-Rhaetian Limes (*Obergermanisch-Rätischer Limes*). After the conquest of Britain the Romans tried to march north as far as possible, but Emperor Hadrian decided to build a wall at the narrowest point, named after him

Hadrian’s Wall (around 130 AD). A wall further north, the Antonine Wall in present-day Scotland, was given up soon, a few decades after its construction.

The Limes consisted of natural and artificial barriers to keep invaders out. From fortresses and watchtowers Roman soldiers could keep an eye on the border. In the fortresses (*castella*) around 500 soldiers were encamped. At first, the military were recruited from local populations. This policy was changed after the rise of the Batavians in 69 AD when Roman soldiers of indigenous origin joined their compatriots against the central authority. After restoring order, troops of various backgrounds were moved all through the Empire. Batavians served in Rome, whereas soldiers from provinces like Thracia, Phrygia, Hispania or Africa protected the border in the Rhine delta. It was a successful system, much later applied by the Red Army in the Soviet Union for the same reasons.

The Roman soldiers had to serve 25 years and were not allowed to marry during their period of service. However, they had close contacts with local women living in the *vicus* near the *castellum*, a community of mixed population. Generally speaking relations between Romans and natives were good. Within in the Empire a slow, but steady process of assimilation took place turning the Germanic and Celtic tribes into Romanized allies or even Roman citizens. The decree of the Emperor Caracalla, in 212, granting Roman citizenship to all inhabitants of the Empire finalized this process. Relationships with inhabitants of the opposite bank of the river were mostly good as well. In peace time (and from 70 AD well into the third century peace was prevailing) the Limes was not an Iron Curtain, but a transparent zone. Trade flourished with the River Rhine and the road on the left bank as transport channels for commodities from the south (wine, olive oil, luxury pottery) against goods from the north (fur, wool, pitch, and dairy). Partly the trade was a matter of barter, but often transactions were paid in hard cash. The Romans introduced a monetary system in these regions with the *aureus* in the role of the present euro or US dollar. Roman coins have been found far from the border, as far as the Baltics.

The system worked well until the third quarter of the third century. Around 270 AD massive invasions took place endangering the Empire. The emperors Aurelian and Diocletian managed to restore order, but the Empire never recovered fully and lost its unity, being split finally in 395 into an Eastern and a Western part. In the Rhine delta, Roman troops did not retake all the left fortresses, partly due to climate conditions resulting in an increasingly boggy soil. At the beginning of the fifth century the Limes could no longer withstand invasions and the Western Roman Empire collapsed within decades.

The Limes ceased to be a fortified border, since it ran across new political entities such as the realm of the Franks. However, elements remained intact, serving other goals. For instance, the Roman
*castellum* Trajectum, situated in the heart of present-day Utrecht, was given by the Frankish ruler to the English missionary St. Willibrord by the end of the seventh century. Later it was used as a mission post by his successor St. Boniface, also an Englishman by birth, who converted Germanic tribes north and east of the River Rhine to Christianity. Later, the former Roman fortress was used as a castle for the bishops of Utrecht and existed probably until the eleventh century. The fate of Trajectum was typical for the whole Roman structure. After being used after the fall of the Roman Empire for a rather long time, buildings and roads fell into decay serving as quarries. In the late 18th century the Roman past was rediscovered, inspired by the excavations of Pompeii.

In the Rhine region, incidental excavations took place during the 19th century, but only after 1900 systematic archaeological research began. In 1926, for instance, evidence was found for the Roman origin of Utrecht. Between 1929 and 1949 extensive excavations were carried out in the city center, on the spot of the *castellum*, revealing the structure of the subsequent Roman fortresses between the middle of the first and the end of the third century AD. Recent excavations on this location have shed new light upon the earlier results combined with the large scale investigations on the western side of the city in the newly developed residential area Leidsche Rijn. This systematic archaeological research, carried out from the 1990s, resulted in new knowledge about the defense structure at the northern border of the Roman Empire. This knowledge is presented to the general public in recently opened site-museums in and around Utrecht: *Castellum Hoge Woerd*, DOMUnder and *Fort Vechten*.

**Museums and the visibility of the Lower Germanic Limes**

These three site museums are playing an important role in making the Lower Germanic Limes visible and tangible for both inhabitants and tourists. Visibility is prerequisite for a wider publicity of the Limes. A questionnaire in 2013 showed a very low rate. The word ‘limes’ was associated rather with citrus fruit than with Romans. Much has to be done, but, on the other hand, much has been done already. As stated above, archaeological research started in the 19th century, with Caspar Reuven (1793-1835) as a pioneer. He was Professor at the University of Leiden and director the National Museum of Antiquities (*Rijksmuseum van Oudheden*, RMO). His excavations of Forum Hadriani near The Hague marked the starting point of Roman archaeology in the Netherlands and his museum work laid the foundation for one the main archaeological collections in the country. After Leiden, the universities of Groningen, Utrecht and Amsterdam developed an archaeological research tradition. Groningen Professor Albert Egges van Giffen (1884-1973) coordinated the excavations of the Roman *castellum* in Utrecht between 1929 and 1949. Not only universities carried out archaeological research, but also individuals and societies, such as the *Provinciaal Utrechtsch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen* (PUG), the Provincial Utrecht Society for Arts and Sciences.

From 1875, the national government took responsibility for the cultural heritage. In 1946 a National Archaeology Survey, the *Rijksdienst voor het Oudheidkundig Bodemonderzoek* (ROB) was founded. Nowadays, this survey is part of the Cultural Heritage Agency, the *Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Eerfgoed* (RCE). From the 1970s, cities initiated archaeological research, installing units in their
The finds resulting from the excavations landed in various collections, private and public. The main museum collections in the Netherlands, related to the Roman Limes, are in Leiden, Nijmegen and Utrecht. The RMO-collection in Leiden is the oldest, dating back to the days of Reuvens. The collection of Museum het Valkhof in Nijmegen originates partly from a private collection (Museum G.M. Kam) and partly from public excavations in the province of Gelderland. The Centraal Museum Utrecht owns an archaeological collection resulting from excavations prior to the establishment of an archaeological unit of the city. The PUG-collection, donated to the city, is a common responsibility for this unit and the Centraal Museum. Of the three museums, Leiden is a purely archaeological museum with the Egyptian collection as its spearhead, but with a permanent display on the Roman presence in the Netherlands. Museum het Valkhof and Centraal Museum both have a mixed character of archaeology, history and various types of art. In Nijmegen, however, the emphasis on archaeology is much stronger than in Utrecht, where contemporary art has become a focus during the last decades.

The collections in Leiden, Nijmegen and Utrecht are a rich source for permanent and temporary exhibitions for the three museums, with intensive interchange of loans. However, smaller museums along the Limes can benefit from the collections too. Stadsmuseum Woerden, Museum Dorestad in Wijk bij Duurstede or Streekmuseum Baron van Brakell in Ommeren, for instance, show interest in presenting the part of the Limes for their communities. The larger museums can offer help, both in objects and in knowledge.

The Limes site museums DOMUnder, Castellum Hoge Woerd and Fort Vechten, mentioned earlier in this paper, are a recent phenomenon in the Netherlands. DOMUnder, showing remnants of the castellum Trajectum under the Cathedral Square (Domplein) in Utrecht, opened in June 2014. Castellum Hoge Woerd started in the summer of 2015 and opened the finished museum part in September 2016. Fort Vechten, opened in October 2015, is at the crossroads of two water-based defense lines: the Lower Germanic Limes and the Nieuwe Hollandse Waterlinie, the Dutch line of defense using large-scale inundations, which has been nominated as UNESCO World Heritage Site for 2018. DOMUnder shows in almost a spooky setting the excavated remains of Trajectum and the Roman road on the right bank of the Rhine. Only the part of the terrain that had already been excavated during the 1930s and 1940s could be used for this visitor center; the rest had to be left undisturbed. The site can only be visited by guided tours.
The Archaeological Park Xanten (APX) with the museum and the protected ruins of the bath house.  
Photo: Axel Thunker

Castellum Hoge Woerd (the Roman name is unknown) is a reconstruction of the Roman fortress in a modern way, totally reversible to spare the Roman remnants under the soil. Only in one corner, disturbed by construction works in the 1950s, a solid building could be erected, that now houses the museum part. This museum shows finds from the extensive excavations with the wreck of a cargo vessel as absolute highlight. The main message of Castellum Hoge Woerd is to give the inhabitants of the new suburb a connection with the environment and the past, from the Romans through the Middle Ages to the landscape that existed until the 1990s. The Castellum is meant as a community center, with the museum integrated in a complex with a theatre, a restaurant, an ecological farm, etc.

Fort Vechten has the most evident connection with the landscape. Apart from the nearby A12 Motorway, the landscape is like in the time the fortress was built as part of the defense line. The fortress was erected in the 1870s right on the spot of the Roman castellum Fectio. The construction gave rise to the first excavations. The building and later the widening of the A12 led to new excavations.

Older and not really a site-museum is the archaeological park Archeon in Alphen aan den Rijn, east of Leiden. Originally meant as an open-air laboratory for experimental archaeology it opened in 1994.
with grand ambitions. Due to financial problems the park had to scale down considerably in ambition and in size. It became a popular destination for schools and gained attention from tourists. The park consists of three sections: Prehistory, the Roman Era and the Middle Ages. In 2011 an archaeological visitor center, the Archeologiehuis Zuid-Holland, was opened, next to the entry of Archeon. Both have a museum status now, presented as Museumpark Archeon. Plans exist to show Roman ship wrecks in Archeon. These were found in the area, conserved and now ready to be presented to the public.

A museum park with a totally different approach is the Archäologischer Park Xanten (APX). Whereas Archeon started as a private initiative, Xanten always has been a project of the regional authority Landesverband Rheinland (LVR). The park was opened in 1977 on the spot of extensive excavations, the Roman city Colonia Ulpia Traiana, an approximately 73 ha plot. Compared to Archeon, APX has a much stronger scientific approach. Buildings are reconstructions on the very spot of the excavations and the roads follow the Roman street pattern. Archeon, on the other hand, is a compilation of Roman, prehistoric and medieval buildings, reconstructed in a free setting not connected to the location. In 2008 the APX was considerably enlarged after a road was transferred. The protected remnants of the Roman bath house and the Römer Museum were integrated into the park. The number of visitors rose steeply to 600,000 in 2015, bringing the APX into the top of German museums. The touristic impact of the park has become an important economic factor in the region.

The artefacts shown in the Römer Museum in Xanten are finds from the region. The museum is one of the three main permanent presentations on the Romans of the Lower Germanic Limes. The other two are the Römisch-Germanisches Museum in Cologne and the LVR Landesmuseum in Bonn. The latter is, like Xanten, an institution of the regional LVR, whereas the Römisch-Germanisches Museum is under the authority of the city of Cologne. The museum, since its founding in 1946 purely archaeological in character, shows in the shadow of the famous cathedral a rich selection of local finds from Roman times to the Early Middle Ages. The collection goes back to the early 19th century, when archaeological research in Cologne started and the city took responsibility that early. A highlight in the collection is the Dionysus mosaic, found in 1941 during construction work for a bunker near Cologne Cathedral. In 1999, German chancellor Gerhard Schröder hosted a dinner on this flour (protected by glass) during the World Economic Summit in Cologne. The collection of the museum in neighbouring Bonn consists of finds from the whole Lower Rhine region. The presentation of the Roman presence in this region used to be a spearhead in the museum, but since the reopening in 2003 the focus is more on art history and contemporary art.

As in the Dutch stretch of the Lower Germanic Limes, smaller museums play a role in presenting the Roman past in the German part also. The Clemens-Sels-Museum in Neuss, for instance, has an attractive presentation on the Castrum Novaesium, the Roman fortress from which the town emerged. The extensive excavations here resulted in rich finds shown in the museum. Artefacts from the cavalry fortress Burginatium can be admired in the town museum of Kalkar (Städtisches Museum Kalkar).

The next stretch of the Limes in Germany, the Upper Germanic-Rhaetian Limes, between Remagen on
the Rhine and Regensburg on the Danube, has already been recognized as World Heritage in 2005. Because this part of the border was over land, the Romans had to build larger defence constructions than in the Rhine area and so more could survive, though not as spectacular as Hadrian’s Wall. Reconstructions as the *Saalburg* near Bad Homburg von der Höhe or the *Castellum Aalen* make the Upper Germanic-Rhaetian Limes visible for visitors, although Aalen closed in August 2016 for a renovation. The Roman Park (*Römerpark*) and *Limeseum* in Ruffenhofen, Bavaria, opened in 2012, use the latest techniques to tell the story of the Limes.

### The path to the nomination of UNESCO World Heritage Site

The museums will play a key role in the path towards the assignment of the Lower Germanic Limes as World Heritage Site, as they have been crucial in presenting the Roman past up to now. In 2013 the Dutch government decided to start a nomination procedure of the Lower Germanic Limes as World Heritage Site for 2021. This nomination is in line with earlier assignments in the Netherlands having a connection to water management. The 17th century land reclamation the Bemster in the province of North Holland, the pumping station Wouda in Friesland, the former island of Schokland in Flevoland, the Amsterdam canal zone, the Defence Line of Amsterdam, all have to do with the struggle of the Dutch against the water, the shaping of the landscape or the use of this landscape for military purposes. The nomination of the *Waterlinie*, the inundation defence line mentioned above, for 2018 lies in the same schedule.

On the track towards assignment the Dutch government chose for cooperation with other authorities, both at home and abroad. With the involvement of the German states North Rhine Westphalia and Rhineland Palatinate, the whole Lower Germanic Limes was covered, bridging the gap between Hadrian’s Wall and the Upper Germanic Rhaetian Limes. Together with the application of parts of the Danube Limes by Austria and Bavaria more than half of the northern frontier of the Roman Empire would be recognized as World Heritage Site. Initiatives by South-Eastern European countries for the rest of the Danube line open the perspective of a Limes with this status from the Irish Sea to the Black Sea. Politicians and civil servants from the Dutch and the German sides work closely together in the nomination process.

Within the Netherlands, the Dutch government sought close cooperation with regional and local authorities. In January 2014 the Minister of Education, Science and Culture, Jet Bussemaker, signed an agreement with the three provinces and 27 cities and towns in the Limes area. The scene was, symbolically, the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden. For the national government the *Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed* (RCE), the Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency, is the responsible department. This agency established the *Nederlandse Limessamenwerking* (Dutch Limes Cooperation) with relevant departments of the three provinces involved (Zuid-Holland, Utrecht and Gelderland). The goal of the cooperation is threefold: the nomination of the Lower Germanic Limes as UNESCO World Heritage Site, supporting projects on Limes hotspots and international cooperation. To this last end close contacts have been laid with the authorities of North Rhine Westphalia and Rhineland Palatinate.
The *Nederlandse Limessamenwerking* installed a new organization, the *Stichting Romeinse Limes Nederland* (RLN), the Foundation Roman Limes Netherlands, in which museums, provincial heritage agencies and private initiatives are represented. RLN coordinates and fosters activities to make the Limes better known among the general public: exhibitions, biking and walking routes, an annual Roman week, organized by the promotion bureau *Romeinen Nu* (Romans Now), initiatives of small companies etc.

![Exhibition on the Limes in Centraal Museum Utrecht (2016-2017) with coins hoards and “Google Maps the Roman Way”, by Olav Odé.](image)

Photo Dea Rijper.

**Exhibition projects on the Lower Germanic Limes, 2016-2021**

In 2021, the year of the aspired assignment of the Lower Germanic Limes as UNESCO World Heritage, the German and Dutch museums involved in the project, will present a joint exhibition. This will show the main results of the archaeological research during the last decades and explain the new insights to a wide audience. It is the story of the Limes that has to be told by various techniques, first of all by the finds as tangible evidence of the Roman presence in the river landscape. The time schedule and the venues have not been decided yet, but a traveling exhibition is the most likely. An example of such a cooperation is the project ‘Vikings on the Rhine’, which was on show in the *LVR*
Landesmuseum in Bonn, the Centraal Museum Utrecht and the Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde, Denmark, between June 2004 and January 2006. The same museum in Bonn, the Römisch-Germanisches Museum in Cologne and the Römer Museum in Xanten are the logical counterparts for the Dutch museums. At the moment, Bonn and Xanten are involved in the preliminary talks on the exhibition project.

As an appetizer for the large exhibition in 2021, the board of RLN proposed a smaller show five years earlier. A subsidy of the RCE enabled such a project. Museum het Valkhof in Nijmegen and Centraal Museum Utrecht took the initiative. The central element in the double exhibition, that opened 2 September 2016, is a map developed by the Dutch designer Olav Odé. The map, printed on a large format, looks like a satellite image, but reflects the situation in the Rhine delta around 200 AD. It is a Google Maps the Roman way, so to speak. On the map the landscape is dominant, with the riverbeds of Rhine and Meuse, the levee’s, the marshes and the dunes. However, the Roman roads, forts and settlements are indicated as well. Visitors can locate their own village or city in the Roman context. The map reflects the results of decades of archaeological research in the Rhine delta. Olav Odé is specialized in processing archaeological data in the design of maps.

In their presentations, Museum het Valkhof and Centraal Museum Utrecht have chosen two different approaches that complement each other. Where Museum het Valkhof emphasizes the military aspect, the Limes as the reinforced frontier of the Roman Empire, is the focus of Utrecht on trade. In peace times, the Limes was not an Iron Curtain, but a transparent zone of exchange between the two banks of the River Rhine. Finds of commercial goods like terra sigilata or amphorae (for the transport of olive oil or wine), combined with four coin hoards show the importance of long distance trade in Roman times. Nijmegen illustrates the military function of the Limes with helmets. Most of the Roman helmets ever found on Dutch soil, could be obtained for this exhibition as a loan. The finds shown in Nijmegen and Utrecht are partly of an earlier date, but some are very recent, such as a large coin hoard found in 2014 in Buren, on the southern bank of the Roman Rhine.

Both the map by Olav Odé and the concept of the combined exhibition are available for smaller museums that show the ambition to present their aspect of the Roman Limes, such as Stadsmuseum Woerden, Museum Dorestad in Wijk bij Duurstede or Streekmuseum Baron van Brakell in Ommeren. When security and climate conditions are well enough artefacts can be on loan as well. Small museums can play a crucial role in turning the Limes from an abstract concept into a real experience for a local community. The relation between landscape and museum can be quite evident. For instance, from the Streekmuseum Baron van Brakell visitors can see the levee shaped by the River Rhine. They are on the southern bank of the Roman Rhine, right on the Limes. Looking from the exhibition out of the window visitors can connect past and present.
The joint session on the Limes in Milan

During the ICOM General Conference in Milan, ICOM Netherlands organized a session on the topic of the Lower Germanic Limes on July 6th, 2016. Partners in the session were ICOM Germany, EXARC, ICOMOS, ICOM-CECA, ICOM MPR and RLN. The speakers, coming from various angles, made it a truly interdisciplinary session approaching the phenomenon Limes from archaeological, historical, museological, touristic and political view-points. The first speaker, the British archaeologist David Breeze, who had been responsible for the nomination of the Antonine Wall as UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008, gave an overview of the European Roman Frontier, putting the Lower Germanic Limes into this broader context. Breeze underlined the specific character of the Lower Germanic Limes with a river defence line in present-day Germany and a delta structure in what is now the Netherlands. He stated that museums can function as the gateways between the presentation of the Roman world in artefacts and the surrounding landscape. Erik Graafstal, leader of the excavations in Leidsche Rijn and now director of the Castellum Hoge Woerd, gave an overview of these excavations and the presentation of the results in the new site museum. He pointed out the importance of the finds both in the broad perspective of the Lower Germanic Limes and related to the local community. Martin Müller, director of the Archaeological Park Xanten outlined the function of a site museum for the South-Eastern part of the Lower Germanic Limes. He emphasized the role of APX in knowledge-transfer from scientific archaeology to a wider audience. Especially since the enlargement of the park and the opening of the museum in 2008 the number of visitors rose sharply and the importance for tourism increased enormously.

The touristic element was the topic of a presentation by Frederieke van Ouwerkerk, senior lecturer on culture, tourism and communication at NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands. She discussed how the Lower Germanic Limes actually is a memory-scape which can be transformed into a challenging tourist destination by using storylines as a connecting thread between landscape and museums in order to make the past visible and tangible. Visibility was also the main issue in the contribution of Christof Flügel, chief consultant for the archaeological museums at the Bavarian Museums Service in Germany: "Making the invisible visible". He explained the Interpretation Frameworks and showed museum projects along the Upper Germanic-Rhaetian Limes in Southern Germany. With the example of the Limeseum in Ruffenhofen he elaborated the challenge of the visibility. He explored the possibilities of storytelling and personal engagement in museum concepts along the Limes. He sketched the perspective of the whole Roman Limes in Europe and even beyond, making it the largest Heritage Zone, spanning 20 countries in three continents.

The policy aspects were outlined in a joint presentation by Tamar Leene and Thomas Otten. They described the administrative and scientific cooperation in the World Heritage nomination process. Dealing with the role of museums in this process, they emphasized the need of cooperation, both at home and abroad. In a short contribution, finally, Jurn Buisman of ICOMOS put forward the connection between heritage and water, an element so crucial for the Lower Germanic Limes. The session ended in a lively discussion between experts and audience. For museum workers from various
countries the importance of the Limes and the task for museums in this matter had been made clear.

**Conclusion**

The nomination of the Lower Germanic Limes as UNESCO World Heritage Site demands an intensive cooperation between Dutch and German authorities at various levels. The challenge is to make the Limes from an almost unknown phenomenon to a landmark cherished by many. There is a crucial role for museums in this process. They can tell the story of the Limes showing finds from early to recent excavations. A focusing point is the connection with the landscape. Especially site museums like *Castellum Hoge Woerd* or the Archaeological Park Xanten can make the Limes visible in the landscape. This is important for the awareness of the Limes as the former Roman border in the world of today among inhabitants and tourists alike. For inhabitants the link with the past gives a grounding in an often newly shaped environment like the Utrecht suburb surrounding *Castellum Hoge Woerd*. Tourism has a cultural dimension, but also an economic benefit for the region, as is clear for instance in Xanten. These elements are highly relevant in the nomination process. Museums know what to do.

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