



# Replicas of Fortlet and Watchtower at Pohl

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The most recent replica constructions on the northern section of the *Limes* in Rheinland-Pfalz, a fortlet and a watchtower from the early *Limes* era, were opened in October 2011 at Pohl in the Rhine-Lahn District. This region has a long history of exemplary reconstruction projects. As early as 1874, and for the first time anywhere on the *Limes*, a replica of a watchtower was erected at Bad Ems. Not far away at the neighbouring fort of Holzhausen is the historical reconstruction of the former *Limes* ditch and wall (fortification), dating from around 1900. The replica structures at Pohl continue this tradition of the historical presentation of the *Limes*.

BY JENS DOLATA

## Historical Excavations and Current Research

After more than 10 years of planning, the full reproductions of the military *Limes* installations at Pohl were erected almost completely authentically over a period of two years and reflect current research on Roman *Limes* architecture. They comprise a fortlet and the *Limes* barrier installations including a watchtower. Based on the excavations of the Imperial *Limes* Commission (*Reichs-Limeskommission*), the earth-and-timber fortlet has been built with the original dimensions of 43m x 34m, but away from the original site. In 1903 Ernst Fabricius and Robert Bodewig were successful in substantially clarifying the spot where the *Limes* line changed course in the form of a wide curve. The “*Ecke bei Pohl*”, as the archaeologist August von Cohausen called this exposed military location, was recognised as a place of particular importance as far back as the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the historical territorial register of the administrative district of Nassau. Old connecting roads, which were already well-known and used when the Roman troops arrived on the scene, explain the construction and function of the *Limes* installations at Pohl. Pohl offers us the chance to explore the significance of a fortlet for the border surveillance policy of the Roman





*In the Limeskastell at Pohl, rampart installations, breastwork and gateway, as well as the fortlet's internal structures, are made of wood and earth. At Pohl, structural details such as the slate roof and the infill of a timber-frame wall are communicated in an accessible and comprehensible manner.*



*Contubernium scene with papilo (sleeping quarters) for the lower ranks and open hearth.*



*Earth wall from the earliest Limes period, made of stacked turf blocks, and timber-framed buildings with painted facing panels imitating ashlar masonry.*



*Replica of a watchtower at Pohl. View of the roof structure with radial rafters, open lantern for channelling smoke and sturdy shaft for the wooden pinecone crest.*

Empire. This includes discussions on different conceptual models relating to military history and *Limes* archaeology, for there are still many archaeological questions on the chronology, development and understanding of the *Limes* installations that remain to be solved. At regional symposiums and international congresses, specialized archaeologists strive to find conclusive and source-based answers, and each year dozens of papers and dissertations are published on questions of *Limes* research. The replica structures at Pohl are part of the scientific effort to create a well-founded reconstruction of life on the *Limes* 1,900 years ago.

## **The Earliest Construction Stage of the Upper German-Raetian *Limes***

By no means were all the *Limes* structures built at the same time or in the same way in each location, for the *Limes* was not a one-off project, but underwent a dynamic process of development during the two centuries in which it existed. At the beginning so-called earth-and-timber works were erected, constructed almost without the use of stone or brick. The fortlet at Pohl is one of these early structures, designed and built – hypothetically – at the turn of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, perhaps under the Emperor Trajan. The wooden tower, a separate fortification, also belongs to this early construction phase. Equipped with its own system of barriers consisting of a circular V-shaped ditch and wooden palisade, it was built directly on the *Limes* demarcation line, in keeping with its function as an observation and signal tower. It stands directly beside the fortlet and belongs to the first development phase of the *Limes* line, which was simply a cleared strip through the forest. Barriers such as a wooden palisade were later added and these were reinforced at an even later date by a rampart and ditch. The watchtower is one of about 900 guard posts along the whole length of the Upper German-Raetian *Limes*. From a functional point of view, it has nothing to do with the adjacent fortlet and the troops that manned the tower were probably not stationed at the fortlet, either. The presentation concept at Pohl combines these two separate elements to provide an immersive museological environment.

Two or three generations later, the military installations at Pohl, which are almost certainly strategically linked to the earth forts at Marienfels, were supplemented and replaced by stone forts such as the one at neighbouring Holzhausen. The fortlet at Pohl had long since been vacated and demolished when the Romans abandoned the Upper Germanic *Limes* section and moved their defence line back to the Rhine in the mid 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Whether the early wooden tower was replaced by a stone tower in the later phase of the *Limes* and whether this was possibly erected on the abandoned site of the former fortlet could no longer be established when the *Reichs-Limeskommission* excavated the area in 1903.

## **Understanding *Limes* Architecture**

Allowing visitors to experience archaeology in a unique and exciting way is our prime objective, which is why the planning of the whole ensemble, the execution of building works and the constructional details are substantiated and complemented by a range of scientific and popular publications and the museum presentation at Pohl.

The German *Limes* Commission has included the interpretive objectives of the interregional museums along the UNESCO Upper German-Raetian *Limes* World Heritage Site in the management plan for the World Heritage Sites. At Pohl the thematic focus is on providing insights into military history, imperial frontiers and *Limes* architecture.

The discovery trail at Pohl interprets these themes in a wide variety of ways. The rampart, breastwork, rampart access and gateway of the fortlet have been recreated as full-size models. Like the watchtower, the fortlet's internal buildings demonstrate numerous unique construction solutions. Visitors can find out how Roman sliding windows and folding shutters worked and experience the atmosphere of the troop barracks and the basilica. There are special features to discover, such as the portal door, based on the smashed bronze door found at the Alban-Entrenchment in Mainz, the full reconstruction of an oak timber-frame wall or the spectacular radial supporting framework of the tower's roof, crowned by a smoke lantern and pinecone. The interpretive content usually found in *Limes* museums has been consciously evolved at Pohl to include such elements as the replica of a scene from everyday Roman life in a *contubernium*. The spatial concept comprises three individual units: the sleeping quarters, the weapon store and the communal area in the portico. Structural solutions had to be found and implemented for the coordination of timber-frame architecture and furniture, for the dimensions of the furniture, as well as for lighting and smoke extraction.

The open hearth in the sleeping quarters, which served both as heating and for cooking the soldiers' meals, has a flue of loam-plastered wickerwork. The smoke fumes are channelled via the attic to the gable end, so that the roof has no individual chimneys (for which, in fact, no excavation finds exist from the Roman forts on the Upper Germanic *Limes*). In this respect we are actually making real inroads into a better understanding of structural solutions on the *Limes*. And so here there are no duplicates of existing *Limes* museum installations: Pohl provides *Limes* connoisseurs, in particular, with much food for thought and further reflection. Pohl has set itself the goal of giving anyone interested the chance to participate in the "knowledge adventure" of *Limes* archaeology, and so over the coming years we aim to gradually supplement the existing replica structures with scenes from the everyday life of the period.

## Understanding how the *Limes* Developed

In addition to the excavation results from the site itself, the replica structures at Pohl are also based on current research on *Limes* architecture at other sites along the Upper German-Raetian *Limes* and at other *Limes* demarcation lines of the Roman Empire. Key aspects of the structural details are the result of the evaluation of literary, epigraphic and pictorial sources. The reliefs on Trajan's Column in Rome, which was dedicated in AD 113, have played a particularly significant role for the replicas at Pohl. In 155 scenes with 2,000 carved figures, the 200m spiral frieze on this 40m high monument depicts the development of a section of the Roman imperial frontier on the lower Danube. In ancient times, the reliefs on Trajan's Column provided the citizens of Rome with a narrative account of the complex achievements of their Emperor. The replica

structures at Pohl follow a similar goal: namely the creation of a vivid and plausible impression of life on the Upper German frontier. The task here is almost the equivalent of an "historical triple jump": *urbs Roma*/Rome – *Mogontiacum*/Mainz – *castellum limitis*/Pohl. Rome was the headquarters of the Empire and the residential city of the Emperor; Trajan's Column still stands there today. It was there that the Emperor gave orders for the construction of the *Limes*. Mainz was the provincial capital of Upper Germania, *caput provinciae Germaniae superioris*, and the most important legionary base on the northern Upper Rhine. It was also the residence and official seat of the Imperial Governor and commander-in-chief of the military forces in *Germania Superior*. It was at Mainz that the imperial orders for the organization of the frontier and frontier fortifications were developed into a fully-fledged planning solution. Here a team of military architects, military strategists and logistics specialists from the pioneer corps and the military procurement office all joined forces to get the *Limes* construction project off the ground. Local implementation of the project was coordinated from special locations along the *Limes*. Following the underlying archeological research hypothesis, Pohl could have been one of these special places. This could have been the control centre for the surveying and construction of the second section of the *Limes* from the Lahn to the Taunus. Specialists from the Mainz legions and their auxiliary units took up quarters here while they organized and supervised the fieldwork of the surveying and construction teams.

## Looking over the Archaeologist's Shoulder

The interpretive concept at Pohl is ambitious: to add spatial and chronological detail to an occasionally simple and generalised overall image of the *Limes* during the last phase of its development. Visitors can participate and learn to put the various *Limes* monuments into context. To do this, we are creating a range of typical scenes from everyday life within Pohl's replica constructions and using museological resources to tell plausible stories about the *Limes*. Interested *Limes* visitors are introduced to archaeological working methods and during their walk around the site at Pohl they can 'look over the archaeologist's shoulder' so to speak, thus acquiring their own, personal understanding of the *Limes*. Visitors can decide for themselves how far they wish to delve into a specific topic.

Our interpretive strategy will have succeeded if a visit to the replica constructions at Pohl helps to reformulate certain preconceived ideas about life on the *Limes* and confirms and perhaps corrects existing knowledge, whilst the sights, sounds and experiences provided here still make it a fun day out. Any visitor who is tempted to return to Pohl for a second visit in the hope of finding answers to puzzling questions on the *Limes* is invited to get involved in further discussions at one of our special events.

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# Pohl and Trajan's Column

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*Limes watchtower on the Danube with circulating external gallery on the upper floor and large signalling torch.*

*Trajan's Column in Rome. Since the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the monumental, over 6 metre high statue of Trajan that once crowned the column has been replaced by one depicting Saint Peter.*

*Roman soldiers building earth-and-timber structures with wooden panelling imitating ashlar masonry.*

At Rome in May of the year AD 113, a monumental column was dedicated, which can only be described as spectacular in every respect, even for the Imperial city of Rome, which at that time – the advanced principate period – was already lavishly endowed with prestigious public buildings. The marble column, including its pedestal, was 40 m high and provided the finishing touch for a grand square, which Emperor Trajan had dedicated on New Year's Day of the year AD 112: *Forum Traiani* and *Basilica Ulpia*.

The column stands in the inner courtyard of two public libraries and gives the impression of an oversized open scroll. The shaft of the monument carries a frieze, almost 200 m in length, which spirals up the column.

Although it was also possible to view the frieze's 155 scenes and over 2,000 carved figures from the upper floors of the libraries, visitors to Trajan's Forum would not have been able to see all the details. It seems reasonable to assume, then, that the cycle of images may have been a chiselled stone replacement for lost papyrus scrolls with painted images that were intended as the Emperor's account of his military expeditions to the Danube in the years 101/102 and 105/106. These had perhaps been offered to visitors as reading copies in ancient times. The associated text of the *Comentarii Traiani Dacici* has unfortunately been lost.

The column is Trajan's legacy. Through it he tells the Roman citizens of one of the greatest achievements of his reign: the conquest of Dacia and the preservation of peace in the Empire through the installation of a *Limes* on the lower Danube.

In the summer of AD 117 Trajan was buried in the pedestal of the column, which was crowned by an oversized statue of the Emperor himself. Only a short time later, in the autumn of AD 117, the Senate voted for the *Consecratio* of *Divus Traianus Parthicus*, a ritual act which elevated him to the rank of a god. He thus celebrated a further triumph, albeit posthumously.

The reliefs on Trajan's Column offer excellent pictorial sources, which help us to understand the complex and multi-faceted processes involved in the construction of the Roman frontier. The reliefs provide significant justification for the replica structures at Pohl: they attest that this was how the Roman army built.

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The Limes fortlet at Pohl is located directly on the B 260 road between Wiesbaden and Koblenz (Bäderstraße, Deutsche Limesstraße).

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