

Along the Limes

The Frontier of the Imperium Romanum in the Netherlands



Imperium Romanum
ca. 200 A.D.

Here a wretched race is found, inhabiting either the more elevated spots of land, or else eminences artificially constructed, and of a height to which they know by experience that the highest tides will never reach. Here they pitch their cabins; and when the waves cover the surrounding country far and wide, like so many mariners on board ship are they: when, again, the tide recedes, their condition is that of so many shipwrecked men, and around their cottages they pursue the fishes as they make their escape with the receding tide.'

Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 16, 1, 3 (ca. 47 AD)

(translated by John Bostock and H.T. Riley [1855])

'Did you know that the Netherlands and Egypt were once part of the same empire?' my companion asks the lad ferrying us across the Old Rhine at Valkenburg, between Leiden and Katwijk. We had cycled here from Leiden. What must once have been the most northerly branch of a mighty and unpredictable river was now reduced to a modest and pleasant stream.

'It must have been a very old empire, then,' the boy answers solemnly. We tell him that with this crossing we are now leaving that empire, but he just stares at us as though flabbergasted.

Seen from this ferry in the orderly, planned and tamed landscape of the central Netherlands, it takes a while before you become aware of the landscape from the beginning of our era that the Romans found between Katwijk, Leiden, Utrecht and Arnhem. At that time this branch of the Rhine wound its way through the country as the northernmost arm of a mighty river that split into a delta before emptying into the North Sea. The skies above it were cloudy for most of the year; it rained there and it blew, the land was low-lying marshland with mounds known as terps rising out of it.

In the sixth decade before Christ Julius Caesar became the first Roman to march as far as the Low Countries with his legions. Twice he crossed the Rhine in Germany. Twice he crossed the Channel to England from a French beach. By about 50 BC he had defeated and subjected the Celtic and Germanic tribes he encountered on his way through France and what is now Belgium. For him it was partly a matter of *Lebensraum*, but his main purpose was to harden his legions and bind them to him. Those legions would make him the most powerful man in Rome. He was murdered in 44 BC and after a civil war his great-nephew and adopted son Octavian achieved absolute power as the Emperor Augustus. During his reign the Romans returned to the Low Countries around 15 BC, this time in a more methodical and organised way. The intention was nothing less than to cross the Rhine, conquer the Germanic tribes and expand the Empire as far as the Elbe. As their base for the assault the generals chose Nijmegen on the Waal, the southern arm of the Rhine. Augustus' stepson Drusus was



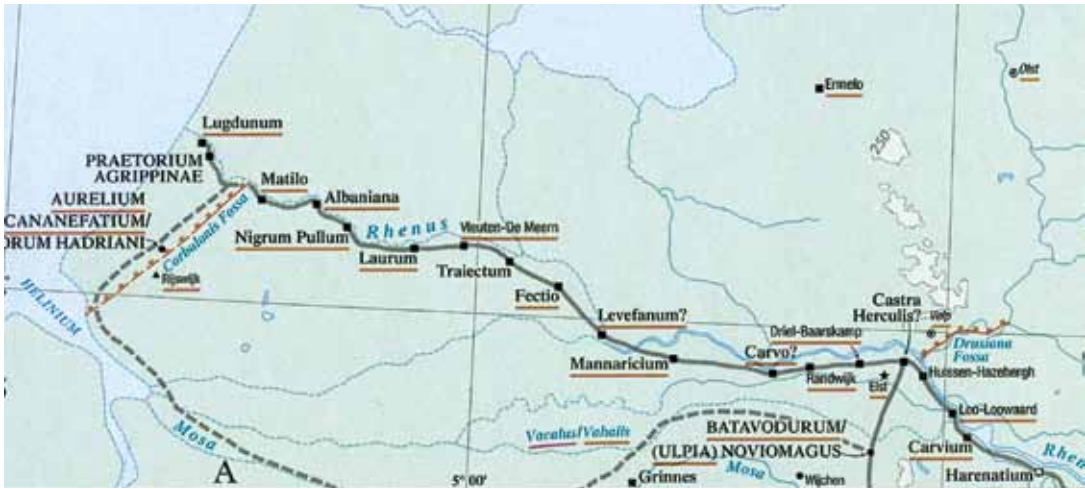
Hadrian's Wall

© Michiel Hendryckx

the senior general. He had canals dug and dams constructed which affected water-levels in the Delta - to the dismay of the native population. The Romans were thus the first creators of the Dutch landscape. And they must have made a great impression on the local Germanic tribes: they were shorter of stature, but well-drilled, organised and equipped with technically superior weapons. The brave but undisciplined rabble of Batavians (in the Betuwe) and Cannefatans (in North and South Holland) was no match for them on the field of battle.

Tour of inspection

In the early years of the second century AD a Roman officer who would later become Emperor made a tour of the Rhine forts. He went to learn and to inspect. I have decided to follow in his footsteps. Using the *Tabula Peutingeriana* as my guide and mentor. The *Tabula* is a medieval copy of a late-Roman road map, which you



Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World, edited by Richard J.A. Talbert. Detail

have to read in the same way as a metro map: from one stop to the next. From this map I select Lugdunum (Katwijk); Praetorium Agrippinae (Valkenburg); Matilo (Leiden, Roomburg); Albaniana (Alphen aan de Rijn); Castra Herculis (Arnhem?); Noviomagus (Nijmegen); Colonia Ulpia Traiana and Vetera (Xanten).

After Drusus' early death in 9 BC his brother Tiberius took over operations on the Rhine and consolidated the Roman positions. Tiberius was a careful and systematic general. His successor Varus was less so. In the notorious battle of the Teutoburgerwald (which actually took place in Kalkriese near Osnabrück) in 9 AD, the Germans made mincemeat of his three legions. Varus was killed and the legionary standards, the famous Eagles, were captured by the Germans. The disaster almost proved too much for the aged Emperor Augustus. The policy of expansion was abandoned. The Romans pulled back across the Rhine.

I cycled from Leiden to Katwijk, once a solidly orthodox Christian village of fishermen, market gardeners and, in summer, holidaymakers, who took over the whole place. Today there are very few fishermen and the market gardeners have also disappeared. Above the dunes gleams the golden dome of a Sufi temple,



Woodcut by Abraham Ortelius. Lighthouse (?) or Brittenburg (?) on Katwijk beach, 1581 © Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague

challenging the Bible. Only the holidaymakers remain. The esplanade looked dank and dejected. The river mouth itself is silted up and subdued, trapped in sluices, obliterated by *Waterstaat* (the Water Management Agency). Yet this is *Lugdunum Batavorum*, the furthest guard post on the northern frontier of the Roman province of *Germania inferior*.

Somewhere here, if we are to believe Suetonius, in the late 30s AD Caligula declared war on the sea. He drew up his legions on the beach, had catapults and siege equipment brought up. Did he want to copy Caesar, who had twice travelled to England? He boarded a trireme, put to sea and returned to the beach. Then he sat on a podium, just like King Xerxes, who in 480 BC observed the sea-battle between the Greeks and Persians at Salamis from a position on land. Then he had the trumpets sounded and finally commanded his soldiers ... to collect shells and fill their helmets and the pockets of their clothing with them. 'This is the booty which the ocean owes to Rome and its Emperor.' To commemorate his victory he had a tall lighthouse constructed on which fires would burn at night to guide ships on their way.

A storm in 1520 exposed the ruins of that lighthouse on Katwijk beach. A 1581 woodcut by Ortelius shows an imposing square ground plan: a base 72 meters square on which would have stood a lighthouse sixty meters in height, later (under Charlemagne?) surrounded by an additional wall.

Now it has all been engulfed by the sea, and all we can do is peer at a spot there in the water. Long ago Katwijk folk used to tell how their nets would regularly get caught on stones from what they called 'Kalla's tower'. It sounds too good to be true. Caligula's lighthouse? An imitation of the *Pharos* of Alexandria on this Dutch beach: sixty metres high?

That Caligula probably did visit the mouth of the Rhine is apparent from a wine-cask found in the area which originates from his personal vineyard. But did Caligula do his shadow-boxing here? Didn't he have shells collected in the vicinity of Boulogne? Was that submerged ruin really once a lighthouse? Wasn't it perhaps a granary? And did it later become a customs fort, the 'Brittenburg', the 'fort' at Britten, which was demolished after the Old Rhine silted up around 1000 AD?

Under Caligula's successor, Emperor Claudius (41-54), the north-western frontier of the Empire was further fortified. Twenty-four *castella*, or forts, were built along the Rhine.



Archeon. Alphen aan de Rijn

© Jeroen Wijnands

Twenty-four hours later I am standing on Corbulo Quay in Voorburg (Forum Hadriani) beside the river Vliet. The streets in this tranquil area – a well-heeled middle-class suburb – not far from The Hague are named for Hadrian and Agrippina.

In the late 40s of the first century AD Corbulo had a canal a good thirty kilometres long dug between the Rhine and the Maas so that the Romans would no longer have to travel by sea. Today the canal flows peacefully along, with trees hanging over and boats bobbing on it.

A little later I shall see the canal again in the Roomburg district of Leiden, when I stand on the quayside of Matilo military camp. There is no water, but somewhere here the Corbulo Canal must have joined the Rhine. A replica of a sunken boat has been set up there. Further on some green water is turning into a pool or a fishpond.

Here in Roomburg the fort has been rendered visible within a park. A cautious approach has been employed. Between the apartment blocks, the children's playground and the vegetable gardens lies the ground plan of the Matilo *castellum*. I like this minimalist approach: it shows you only the area the fort occupied, you have to imagine the walls and watchtowers, the water in the canals for yourself. You walk along the straight streets of the camp, which cross each other at perfect right angles. There is almost nobody here, just a woman with a walking frame, a jogger, a carrier tricycle with six children propelled by two women. Ravens settle on the clods of ploughed earth.

In 69 AD the Batavians, led by Julius Civilis, rebelled against the Romans. It so happened that after the death of Nero in 68 several generals were competing for the imperial crown, and the Batavians took advantage of this. All the *castella* along the Rhine were destroyed. But the Romans always come back. Those who submit are spared. Those who resist are destroyed.

After being defeated Julius Civilis negotiated his surrender on a wrecked bridge over a river ('Nabalia') in the land of rivers. Was this a bridge over the Waal, the Rhine or the Maas? We don't know. The surviving text of Tacitus' *Historiae* breaks off in mid-sentence at the start of the negotiations. Civilis expresses his admiration for Emperor Vespasian and describes him as his friend. What else did the defeated resistance fighter/terrorist say to the Roman general Cerialis? What happened to him? Was he pardoned? Banished? Or simply

murdered and thrown in the river? Whatever their leader's fate, the Batavians were back under the Roman yoke. Not long afterwards they were again valued allies of Rome, free of taxation and providers of loyal elite troops.

When Hadrian makes his inspection tour of the Low Countries in the summer of 121 he orders soldiers to be recruited from the local population: clear proof of the Romanisation of the area. He also has a road built from Katwijk to Xanten on a dike that runs along the ring of forts. Everything is rebuilt and strengthened. And then it's a matter of waiting for history to catch up with this frontier.

With the first tsunami of barbarian invasions, beginning in 240, the forts on the Empire's northern frontier were abandoned. The rising water-level in the Rhine probably also played a part in this. It is no coincidence that the coins found in the ruins of the Brittenburg near Katwijk date from no later than 270 AD.

Re-enactment

Archeon is the first historical theme-park on the *limes*. It is located in Alphen aan de Rijn where once stood the *castellum Albaniana*. Here for a fee one can see 'slices of life' from Prehistory, Roman times and the Middle Ages. The Roman times turn out to begin very precisely in 12 BC (more or less the moment when the legions first turned up here, though that was mainly to prepare for a crossing of the Rhine). That period ends in 406. We know that on New Year's Eve 405-406 Germanic tribes crossed the frozen Rhine near Mainz and poured into Gaul. The beginning of the end.

In the car park a legionary in full kit is on duty to set the tone: 'Good morning, sir'. Posters ask me: 'How Roman are you?' and 'Have you got Roman blood in your veins?' I don't want to know. In the park I bump into a bunch of middle-aged Englishmen marching themselves somewhat stiffly into a sweat. The orders – yelled in Latin – are supposed to turn this *cohors Britannica* into a smoothly operating unit that will impress tourists with its *esprit de corps*. The attendants in sandals and tunics are getting ready for the day's work. A young woman whose roots clearly lie in the 'warm parts of the kingdom', but who has to look like a Roman matron here and now, tells me that the *cohors* descends on the park every few years. Complete with wives and children. The latter sell trinkets in the little shops by the bathhouse while their men play at being Romans. The woman herself had studied art history in Utrecht and done her dissertation on Mesopotamia. Yes, this is her full-time job. And she clearly enjoys it. Re-playing history. Re-enactment. In *Archeon* one can also visit a tavern and a temple. And in the afternoon, she tells me, I can watch a genuine gladiatorial combat. But the *limes* calls. And I travel on past Zwammerdam (*Nigropullum*, Black Hen!) and Bodegraven, whose *castellum* has yet to be discovered, to Laurium. Otherwise Woerden, occupied by the French in the disaster year of 1672 despite being part of Holland's waterline. Here I go in search of *Parking Castellum*. In this underground car park the results of the excavations are shown on a handful of boards and display cases. Four Roman river craft have been found here, but the wood was so soggy and rotten that it proved impossible to salvage them. A bit later I am sitting on a terrace in the market next to Sint Petrus Church and studying today's Batavians: tall, friendly, with their eyes wide open. This tribe produces sporting heroes and Olympic medallists in profusion. The girls who

Utrecht A.D. 200



wait on the customers are blonde, efficient and transparent. Their t-shirts label them *(h)eerlijk* (fair), *(bio)logisch* ((bio)logical) and *'natuur(lijk)* (natur(al)), and so they are. Cycling across the church square come some Turkish Dutchmen. Or so I assume, from the dark creases in their faces and their meticulously trimmed moustaches. Woerden is reputed to be the most average town in the Netherlands. This is where people test new products and try to plumb the soul of the people. The town has everything, from a prayer house to a cannabistro (sic!). When I move on, I discover I have been sitting on the wall of the castellum: a line marking its outer wall runs diagonally across the market square.

I leave Vleuten (Fletio) and the Hoge Woerd *castellum* in Leidsche Rijn on my left and head for Utrecht. The town welcomes me with a cloudburst, thunder and lightning. Looming above the Amsterdam-Rhine Canal is the office block of *Waterstaat*. In this part of the world it was the Romans who first tamed the water and safeguarded the land. Two millennia later the Dutch have perfected their work: '... their tireless hands manufactured this land, / drained it and trained it and planed it and planned', to quote the English poet James Brockway who found refuge in this country after the last war.

On Cathedral Square in Utrecht is a milepost which says that Vleuten – De Meern is 7.8 kilometres away and Fectio (Vechten) is 6.22. Within the *castellum* that the Romans built here in a bend of the Rhine, further protected by the Vecht, there now stands the cathedral and its tower. *Traiectum*, a crossing-point. From here the Anglo-Saxon Willibrord converted the Frisians to Christianity in around 700 AD. The Catholic cathedral became a Reformed church in the sixteenth century, though in 1672 the French made it Catholic again for a year. Today it is a fair-trade church and one can hire it. To the Catholic boy I once was that still seems a bit odd. As you walk round the church you stumble on the metal strips in the paving which demarcate the walls of the Roman fort and light up in the dark. The university faculties of humanities and law still lie more or less inside the fort. In the late sixteenth century the *Église wallonne* behind the cathedral, the old Sint Petrus, received the first Protestant refugees from Tournai and, a century later, French Huguenots. Today the third wave consists of Africans who have fled their French-speaking countries. Rome no longer



Utrecht A.D. 2000

has any say in the *castellum*, but the clergy still speak a Latin language there.

Trying to place the *castellum* in the centre of this much-expanded city, I seek the north, where the Rhine was. Perhaps the Oude Gracht, Utrecht's longest dining table, is a small branch of the Rhine which once protected the western side of the *castellum*. Be that as it may, that evening I sit beside it and enjoy pasta provided by an Italian from the Veneto. From time to time he throws some bread in the water to stir the ducks from their lethargy and suddenly rouses swarms of seagulls – the most shameless of all birds, and now everywhere to be found. It turns out that the cathedral tower has a carillon and canoes slip past. The urban idyll of a summer evening in the heart of the Netherlands, one of the most densely populated and most prosperous parts of the world, has long ago supplanted the edge of the world, the endless morass, the desolation of the terp.

Over the dike

Right next to the motorway sits Fort Fectio, hermetically sealed within an orchard belonging to the Province of Utrecht. 'They won't let you stick a spade in the ground', says the lady from the *Werk aan de Linie* (Work on the Line) Foundation in the other fort next to it. Fort Vechten is part of the new Dutch waterline built in the nineteenth century to protect the Randstad against enemies from the east and south. Artillery, and especially aircraft, would have no trouble bypassing this line. The fort itself is the property of *Staatsbosbeheer* (the forestry commission) and is hidden from sight by water and trees, but nowadays *Werk aan de Linie* is permitted to let out the casemates for parties and celebrations.

Levefanum was once a Roman *castellum* at the junction of the [Crooked] Rhine and the Lek. Today Wijk bij Duurstede is a pleasant little town that maintains the high water level in its harbour by means of a metal gate. The castle was the residence of the bishops of Utrecht. Ruysdael painted a mill there.

In the early Middle Ages there was a flourishing trading post here by the River Dorestad on the border between the Franks and the Frisians. The Vikings came and looted it. Towards the end of the ninth century the settlement gradually dwindled away.

It takes me a while to realise that since the time of the *limes* the course of the rivers has changed. The fort stood on the other side of the water, south of the Lek, in the water-meadows near Rijswijk.

I take the car ferry across the river and drive past Rijswijk to Maurik (Mannaricum). From there I take the Rhine Dike past Kesteren (Carvo) to Randwijk and Driel. Here the once majestic Rhine retains only its waywardness and the expansive water-meadows which hide the river itself from view.

Before Arnhem (Castra Herculis?) I turn south and head for Nijmegen, the key point in the defence of *Germania inferior*. Next morning I am standing on the Kops Plateau outside the town. A woman taking her dog for a walk takes me to the spot where I can see the dead-flat Ooi polder stretching all the way to the Waal. Did Drusus stand here about 12 BC, estimating his chances of conquering the vast lands on the other side of the Rhine?

'We're standing on a lateral moraine,' the woman says. 'In the Ice Age huge quantities of earth and stones were pushed as far as this by the advancing ice. The ice stopped here, and when it melted it left these hills.'

On the Ubber country road – the very same road which ran behind the *limes* from Katwijk to Cologne – I happen upon the Porta Romana, which is now an apartment block. On the street corner a short film tells me that this was the site of one of the gates of the army camp where the Tenth Legion was based in the first century.

I abandon my search for the bridge where Julius Civilis negotiated with the Roman general Cerialis and drive from Nijmegen to Xanten (Vetera) in Germany. The Thirtieth Legion Ulpia Victrix, founded by Trajan and named for his victories in Romania, was quartered here from 122 and would remain here for about two hundred years. Alongside the camp a town grew up: Colonia Ulpia Traiana.

The decline set in with the silting up of the Rhine around 250 AD and the German incursions. In the fourth century the inhabitants retreated into a part of the town then known as Tricensima.

In the late eighth century people came on pilgrimage ad sanctos, 'to the saints', to Xanten, to the graves of holy martyrs in the town's cathedral. One of these was Victor, a converted legionary.

In Xanten the Germans have opted for reconstructing the Roman town: here one can see walls and towers, a tavern and a port temple, a genuine amphitheatre where the Egyptian props for a performance of *Aïda* contrast with the cathedral towers behind them. There is a brand new museum. Everything is neat and tidy. Too neat and tidy for my taste.

The shifting *limes*

On New Year's Eve 405-6 the *limes* was overrun once and for all when Vandals, Alans and Suevians crossed the frozen Rhine near Mainz and swarmed into Gaul. Four years later Rome would be sacked for the first time since 390 BC by the Visigoth Alaric. The Romans pulled out of the Rhineland and left the defence of their northern frontier to the Franks. Nominally these remained loyal subjects of Rome. They continued to speak Latin, but in reality they were now sovereign and would extend their authority southwards.

Looking at the historical *limes* in the Netherlands of today, one can only conclude that it never was a hermetically sealed frontier. From Claudius on,

the Romans used the Rhine as an artery for the transport of trade goods and troops. The remains of freight-carriers have been found at Zwammerdam, Alphen aan den Rijn, Woerden and Utrecht. Like Hadrian's Wall in Northern England, the *limes* was rather a line where the movement of goods and people could be regulated, a way of demonstrating, here at the edge of the world, that one was a world power.

When I was in Xanten I briefly considered taking a boat to Cologne: *Colonia Agrippina*, the capital of *Germania inferior*, linked to Boulogne by a network of military roads (the most northerly branch of which was the line Cassel, Courtrai, Velzeke, Asse, Tienen and Tongeren). It is said that, some time after the invasions in the mid-third century, the Romans withdrew behind this line and used the area to the north of it as a buffer zone, at most retaining the friendship of the Germanic tribes who lived there. Around this last line of defence, this last *limes*, the language frontier gradually crystallised: to the north of it people



Tabula Peutingeriana (ca. 1200). Codex Vindobonensis 324. Nationalbibliothek, Vienna. Detail

would eventually speak a Germanic language, to the south a Romance language derived from Latin. And today that *limes* runs diagonally through Belgium. It is often said that that line, and Belgium itself, still marks the transition between Northern and Southern Europe, between the Latin and the Germanic world. But that is another story. ■

FURTHER READING

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