

Long lost Roman fort discovered in Gernsheim

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In the course of an educational dig in Gernsheim in the Hessian Ried, archaeologists from Frankfurt University have discovered a long lost

Roman fort: A troop unit made up out of approximately 500 soldiers (known as a cohort) was stationed there between 70/80 and 110/120 AD. Over the past weeks, the archaeologists found two V-shaped ditches, typical of this type of fort, and the post holes of a wooden defensive tower as well as other evidence from the time after the fort was abandoned.

An unusually large number of finds were made. This is because the Roman troops dismantled the fort and filled in the ditches when they left. In the process they disposed of a lot of waste, especially in the inner ditch. "A bonanza for us," according to Prof. Dr. Hans-Markus von Kaenel from the Goethe University Institute of Archaeology. "We filled box after box with shards of fine, coarse and transport ceramics; dating them will allow us to determine when the fort was abandoned with greater accuracy than was possible before".

Up until now, little was known about Roman Gernsheim, even though findings from the Roman era have been cropping up here since the 19th century. "Previously, the only thing that seemed certain based on the finds was that an important village-like settlement, or "vicus", must have been located here from the 1st to the 3rd century, comparable with similar villages which have already been shown to have existed in Groß-Gerau, Dieburg or Ladenburg", explained dig leader Dr. Thomas Maurer. He has been travelling from Frankfurt to South Hesse for years and has published his findings in a large publication about the North Hessian Ried during Roman imperial times.

"It was assumed", continued Maurer, "that this settlement had to have been based on a fort, since it was customary for the families of the soldiers to live outside the fort in a village-like settlement." "We really hit the jackpot with this excavation campaign", said a delighted Prof. Dr. Hans-Markus von Kaenel. "The results are a milestone in reconstructing the history of the Hessian Ried during Roman times." For almost 20

years now, von Kaenel has been studying this area with the help of his colleagues and students using surveys, digs, material processing and analyses. The results have been published in over 50 articles.



The Romans built the fort in Gernsheim in order to take control of large areas to the east of the Rhine in the seventh decade of the 1st century AD and to expand the traffic infrastructure from and to the centre of Mainz-Mogontiac. The fact that Gernsheim am Rhein was very important during Roman times is supported by its favourable location for travel: A road branches off from the Mainz – Ladenburg – Augsburg highway in the direction of the Main Limes. One can assume that a Rhine harbour existed as well, but this couldn't be verified during the course of this dig. "That was always unlikely on account of the chosen

location", according to Maurer. Gernsheim continued to expand during the 20th century, and this expansion threatened to wipe out more and more of the archaeological traces. While the Roman remains were mostly still hidden under fields and gardens in the year 1900, they were gradually built over and thus lost to methodical archaeological research. The last plot of any measurable size where it might still be possible to make findings from the Roman era was an area in the south west of the city between the B44 and the River Winkelbach. But in 1971 the excavators moved in here as well. Maurer added: "At the time, a few volunteers from the Heritage Conservation Society were barely able to save a few Roman finds.

On August 4 of this year, the annual educational dig run by the Goethe University Institute of Archaeology began on one of the few remaining properties which had not been built on; a double lot at Nibelungenstraße 10-12. "According to my maps of those Gernsheim sites which could be located, we are at the far western edge of the area in which the finds are concentrated, right at the edge of the lower terrace, since the nearby River Winkelbach flows into the Rhine basin from here", explained dig leader Maurer. Isolated Roman finds were made on almost all neighbouring properties during the 1970s and 1980s. "Thus the site seemed to be a worthwhile location for a dig, which turned out to be very much the case."



Over the past five weeks, 15 students of the "Archaeology and History of the Roman Provinces" course carefully stripped away the soil, mapped and documented the finds, and recovered and packaged them by type. The work was supported by Frankfurt archaeologists from the Hessian State Office for the Preservation of Historical Monuments (Hessen ARCHÄOLOGIE, Darmstadt branch) and by the Art and History Society of Schöfferstadt Gernsheim. Some members of this society, which also operates the local museum, supported the dig team on a daily basis. The documentation and the findings from this excavation campaign form the basis for a thesis at the University, work on which will start in the winter semester.

Provided by Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main

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