

## **Excursion into the early history of a rural region**

### **1. Introduction**

In recent decades, the knowledge of the cultural situation and the processes of pre- and early historic periods in central Europe could be significantly expanded. This knowledge was achieved both through the archaeological exploration of additional individual finds and larger building structures (compare 2, p. 54 ff; 5, p. 11 ff). Special interest among other things is the attempted military occupation of Germania by the Roman Empire of the areas east of the River Rhine. The interest in this can be explained by the last historical effect of this period. On the other hand, the individual finds and secured investments are relatively more numerous and often more clearly classified than those of previous time series.

As an example of extended knowledge for the time of Roman actions, the area Northern Hesse / Southern Lower Saxony is cited. For this time, the region can be regarded as a common area of Roman operations in central Germania (today's central Germany). The extended knowledge has led to some additional aspects for existing landscape features and isolated structures in village settlements. These are the reason for the following compilation.

### **2. Overview of Roman actions**

The beginning of concrete plans for the integration of the regions east of the Rhine in Germania is from about 16 B.C. onwards (6, p. 282 ff.). The implementation of this first phase was carried out by Drusus, stepson of Emperor Augustus and governor of the Roman territories left of the Rhine. Upto 12 B.C., in a first step forts and several main camps in strategically important sites were laid out with military assignment. At about 12 B.C. the regionally most important main camp Hedemuenden was laid out. The location is ca. 30 km southeast of the city of Goettingen in Lower Saxony. Three major campaigns were undertaken by Drusus from 12 B.C. for the planned military subjugation of the areas east of the Rhine upto the River Elbe.

- 12 B.C. started a campaign from the Lower Rhine region with the assistance of a fleet (over the Zuidersee) along the North Sea coast to the estuary of the River Elbe.

- Again from the Lower Rhine region (Xanten) 11 B.C. started a larger operation along the River Lippe in the middle region of the River Weser (tribal area of the Cheruskans).

- Probably the most extensive operation (three legions) led Drusus 9 B.C. from Mainz through the Western Hessian valley areas to the main camp of Hedemuenden/River Werra and then further to the River Elbe. The return way led probably up the River Saale and then along a line south of the Harz Mountain again to the main camp of Hedemuenden. On this train back Drusus died as a result of an accident.

- At a temporal interval a campaign took place 5 B.C. along the River Main east in local tribal areas.

The campaigns were accompanied by devastation of surrounding areas and forced the Germanic tribes recognition of Roman supremacy or commitment to the alliance. – After Drusus's death, leadership was passed to his brother (and later emperor) Tiberius. This led again from 8 B.C. to several campaigns across the regions east of the Rhine upto the River Elbe (13, p. 35 ff). With these undertakings, the recognition of Roman supremacy was consolidated for several years. As from the military camps, the punctual influence on the internal life of the Germanic tribes was extended collaterally. However in 2 A.D. again there was a great uprising of the north western tribes which was fought down by Tiberius in 3/4 A.D. It was followed by a solid phase of Roman supremacy and influence. This ended abruptly in 9 A.D. with the defeat of Varus against a Germanic coalition under the leadership of Cheruscan ruler Arminius and the loss of three regions.



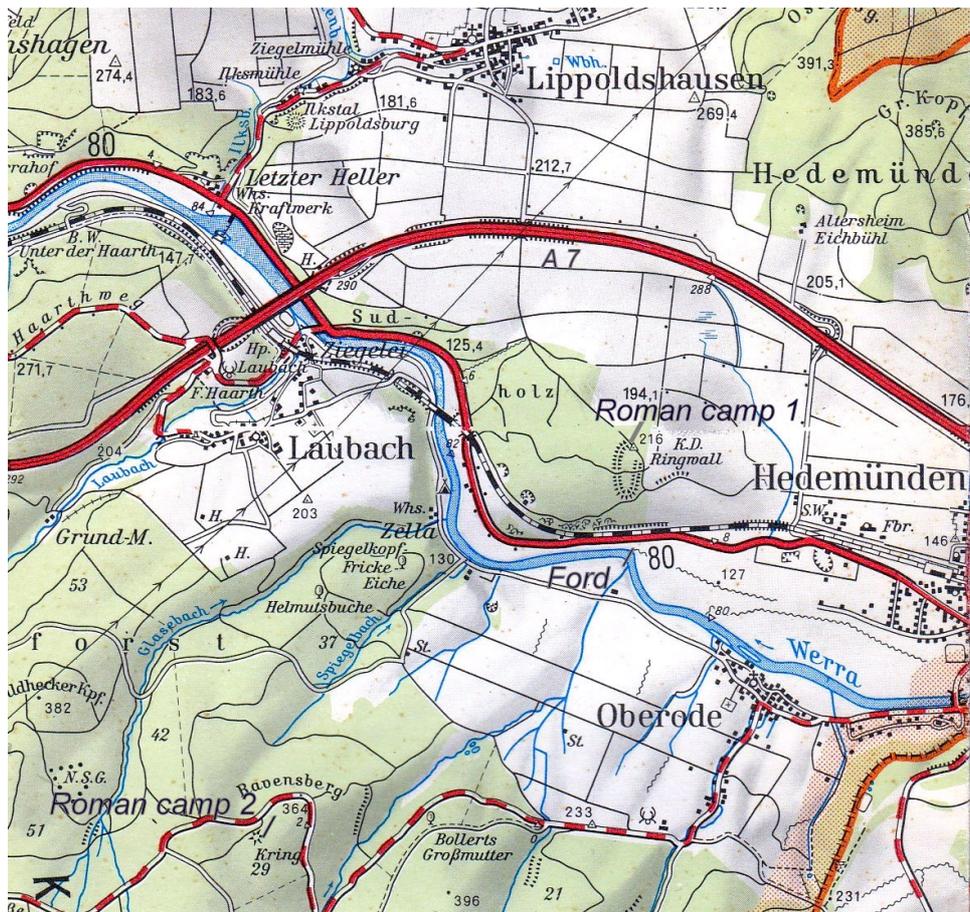
**Fig. 1:** View from the south east on the wooded plateau west of Hedemuenden – location of the main Roman camp.

In the years 14 to 16 A.D. several more major campaigns were undertaken by the Romans under the leadership of Germanicus, including the areas of the Cheruskans (middle region of the River Weser) and the Chatti (Northern Hesse). The operations were carried out as revenge campaigns and the renewed subjugation of the Germanic tribes. Since no lasting success emerged, a departure from the plan of the conquest of the Germanic areas east of the Rhine is to be from about 17 A.D. (6, p. 296). The time of Roman efforts to gain supremacy lasted from 14 B.C. to 9 A.D., i.e. 23 years. Beyond that, until the end of the Germanicus campaigns, are 30 years. The fighting required heavy losses on both sides and, on the Roman side, considerable military infrastructure expenditures. Therefore the attitude of the offensive strategy is understandable. The battles continued, however, interrupted by decades of long rest, in the following centuries until the end of the migration. At the same time an appreciation of the Roman presence in Germania took place through mutual exchange of goods and trade. In this way, direct Roman influence may have been exerted, such as ore and metal extraction and the production of agricultural products (13, p. 89 ff).

### 3. Extended regional knowledge through exploration of Roman bases

The exploration of the Roman military camps has contributed significantly to expanded ideas about the nature and extent of Roman enterprises. In addition to the relatively few permanent camps temporary marching camps were erected along the marching paths. As an example refer to the more precisely documented marching camp Wilkenburg near Hannover (12). In the region of North Hesse/Southern Lower Saxony, the gradual exploration of the main camp Hedemuenden has helped to arouse interest in Roman offensive period and to gain a deeper perspective.

Fig. 1 shows the location of the camp on a wooded plateau now with a steep drop to the River Werra. In the valley there is a ford, which allowed a crossing of the River Werra from the march path on the heights of the opposite Kaufunger forest directly to the camp (see Fig. 3). To secure the march paths and the main camp, the smaller side camp Kring was located on the opposite slope (Fig. 2). Due to its location on a river, ships could dock on the line North Sea – River Weser and contribute to the supply of the camp.



**Roman camp 1: Main camp Hedemuenden; Roman camp 2: Subcamp Kring;  
Ford: Area with crossing the River Werra to the main camp; A7: Highway 7 ;**

(Source: Hessian State Office for Surveying, District Map Witzenhausen 1:50000, issue 1970).

**Fig. 2: Spatial location of the Roman camps Hedemuenden and Kring in the natural area Lower River Werra.**

The main camp, including annexed facilities, had a total area of 25 ha (5, p. 11 ff). Significant importance had the main camp for the last campaign of Drusus: from Mainz via West Hesse to Hedemuenden upto the River Elbe with the following return march, again via Hedemuenden. .

Scheduled the main camp was from 12 B.C. The site was favoured by its location by the river and by an old long-distance way that ran north as a mountain trail from the south to the River Werra, with branch offs to the east and west.

The successful exploration of the main camp has stimulated historically interested groups for further exploration. So for the campaign of Drusus 9 B.C. the approximate locations of the marching camps from southern Hesse to Hedemuenden could be demarcated (9, p. 7 f). Furthermore the location of other bases in the north to the valley of the River Leine were outlined.



**Fig. 3:** Bank area of the ford across the River Werra on the slope of the Roman camp Hedemuenden (see Fig. 2 for special position).

#### **4. Economic connections in the wider surrounding area**

Hedemuenden's main camp was equipped with central, larger building complexes on stone foundations and with rows of functional buildings for equipment, supplies and craft activities. During the existence of the camp, it was permanently occupied and was used intensively (5, p. 302 ff.). March paths connected the regional hinterland at least partially to the base. Under these conditions, the location was anxious to cover its own supply and the secondary camps as much as possible from the surrounding area. There was a particular need for metals to complement military equipment and agricultural products for nutrition.

The extraction of metals from regional deposits can be understood relatively clearly. Both in the Hedemuenden main camp and in the Kring subcamp, iron slag was found which suggests the on-site processing of metals (5, p. 268 ff). – For the mining of metal ores in the vicinity of the camp are relatively many sites of ore mining detectable, used in protohistoric times. It is all about near-surface deposits, which

were probably already used in the Bronze Age and the subsequent Celtic culture period (about 800 to 100 B.C.). Thus in the area of the small town of Witzhausen, located to the east of Hedemünden, twelve sites can be defined with Bronze Age ore mining (4, p. 10 ff). The distance between these deposits and the main camp lies between 12 and 20 km. It can be assumed that these deposits were placed directly under Roman supervision or that the raw materials were obtained from local operators as supplies or deliveries. Roman coin finds near some ore deposits confirm this assumption.

Some of the researches involved in the clarification of the Roman presence have also extended to the historic manors in villages of the River Werra and River Leine valleys. These research results for some farms show that they have been created as *villae rusticae* and used. The question that arises whether these references can have a real basis, further consideration seems appropriate.

The *villa rustica* is mentioned not only for Italy, but also for the Roman occupied areas of Central Europe (south of the Danube and the areas west of the Rhine) as the predominant type of land management (2, p. 72 ff.). The central European *villae rusticae* are described as larger courtyards, laid out in a rectangular shape, with a larger main house in the upper middle and laterally arranged storage and stable buildings. The average farm size is called 100 ha. After that it is unlikely that the partial supply of a still camp in the time available estates of this type could be created and operated – especially in a necessary tribal area in Roman supremacy.

It appears more probable that already existing larger farms were to supply agricultural products or were directly under supervision. Can however larger farms in Germanic tribal territory be accepted with an almost rural settlement? Manors in the context of largely similar, rural property are to be assumed, if it is an already structured society with a larger land ownership.

An articulated society can already be assumed for Central Europe for the Bronze Age (see 7, p. 54 ff.). For the Celtic cultural period (800 to ca. 100 B.C.), a peasant society is clearly described, which in addition to regional princes had a noble leadership (11, p. 28 ff.). Thus for a Germanic settlement on the North Sea coast in the plant of the village, a contrasting larger yard is provable (3, p. 32 ff).

Thus at least the assumption is that in the example region there were larger farms long before the attempted Roman occupation. It is therefore likely that these mansions were used under Roman supremacy as quasi *villae rusticae* – and have been used later by a Germanic leadership.

The mentioned themes make it clear – even if some facts can only be classified with probabilities – that the rural area has a much longer cultural history than the city culture that is mostly seen in the foreground today.

## 5. Literature (selection)

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