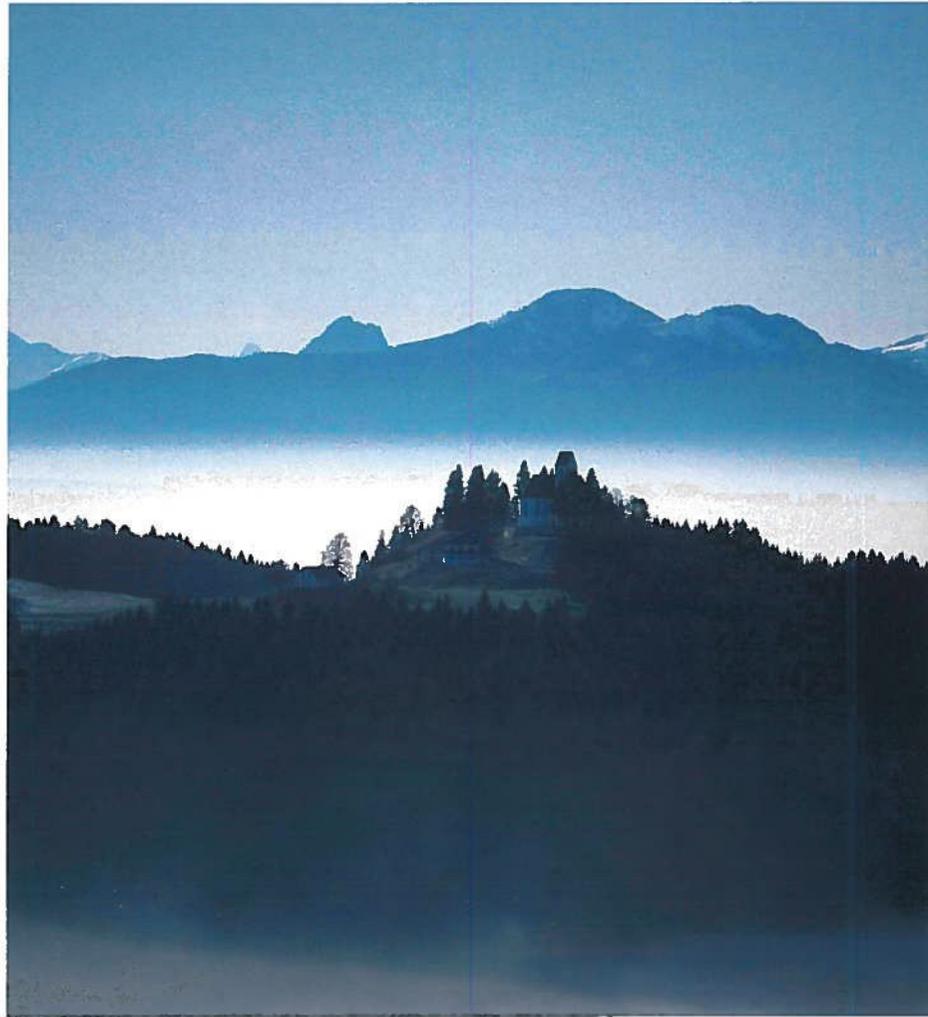


# I The Limes in Southern Germany - The History of a Roman Frontier



From AD 13 onwards the first capital of the province of Raetia was built on the Auerberg near Bernbeuren.

## Beyond the Alps

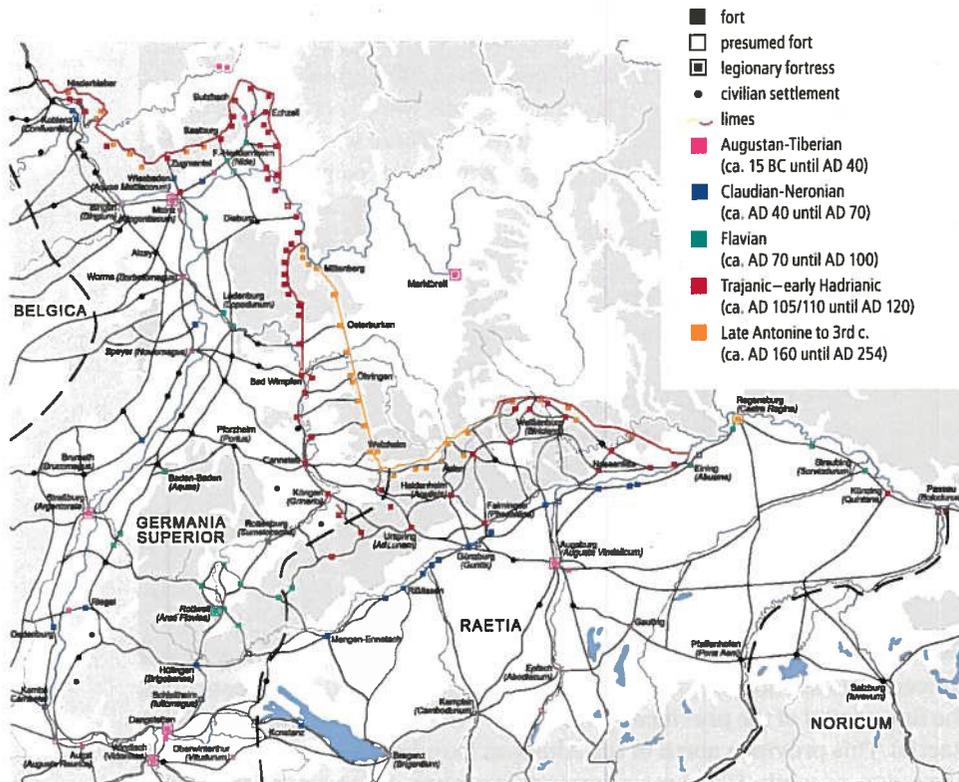
"I have pacified the provinces of Gaul, Spain and also Germania, ... I had the Alps ... pacified". This is how Augustus (31 BC - AD 14) described his accomplishments in the North in Chapter 26 of the *Res gestae*, the autobiographical report of his life and deeds. The Alpine campaign of 16/15 BC, commanded in the key phases by his stepsons Drusus and Tiberius (who later became emperor), also brought the northern foothills under Roman control. However, even during Augustus's lifetime it became clear that the "pacification" was not deep-rooted. Varus's crushing defeat at the hands of the Germanic tribes in AD 9, which resulted in the loss of three legions, or roughly one-tenth of the entire Roman army, made it obvious that another strategy was required for the region east of the Rhine.

We know of only a few places beyond the Alps that can be associated with the first occupation phase. At Döttenbichl in Oberammergau the locals had a cult site where captured Roman weapons were sacrificed. A battle with the Romans may have taken place here, too. There was also a small fort near Epfach at a crossing of the River Lech and a camp at Friedberg-Rederzhausen, near Augsburg. Further early military locations include Augsburg-Oberhausen, where a large amount of finds was deposited by a flood - the troop's original location is unknown - and the legionary fortress of Dangstetten, between Lake Constance and the bend of the Rhine at Basel. Both places were occupied by several thousand soldiers whose mission was to secure key routes for military advances, such as the passes through the Alps. Additional military stations were not required, because, as archaeological research indicates, the area known by the Romans as Vindelicia, which stretched to the Danube, as well as the area beyond the river were not inhabited.

After the military occupation of this territory, the Romans established new settlements, including Bregenz and Kempten in the first decade AD, followed shortly thereafter by the topographically strategic location of Auerberg (west of Schongau), at a height of 1,000 m. It may be that Auerberg, with a defensive system more than three kilometres long protecting a high concentration of buildings and a diversity of industrial activity, constituted the first capital of the province of Raetia and Vindelicia (later known only as Raetia). This province north of the Alps was founded soon after the Alpine campaign, or while Tiberius was present at around AD 10-12. In the 20s AD at the earliest, small Roman-style villages were established along the new

long-distance roads in the western area of the triangular region between the Alps, Bregenz, Augsburg and the area where the River Inn leaves the Alps. Settlements in the eastern part of the province had a more indigenous character.

The first "border" line was built by the Romans around AD 40 on the southern bank of the Danube. A chain of forts between Hüfingen by Donaueschingen and Oberstimm\* by Ingolstadt were generally located where the river meandered close to the southern shore, or at the beginning - or end - of sizeable lowlands. It may also be that additional fortlets were

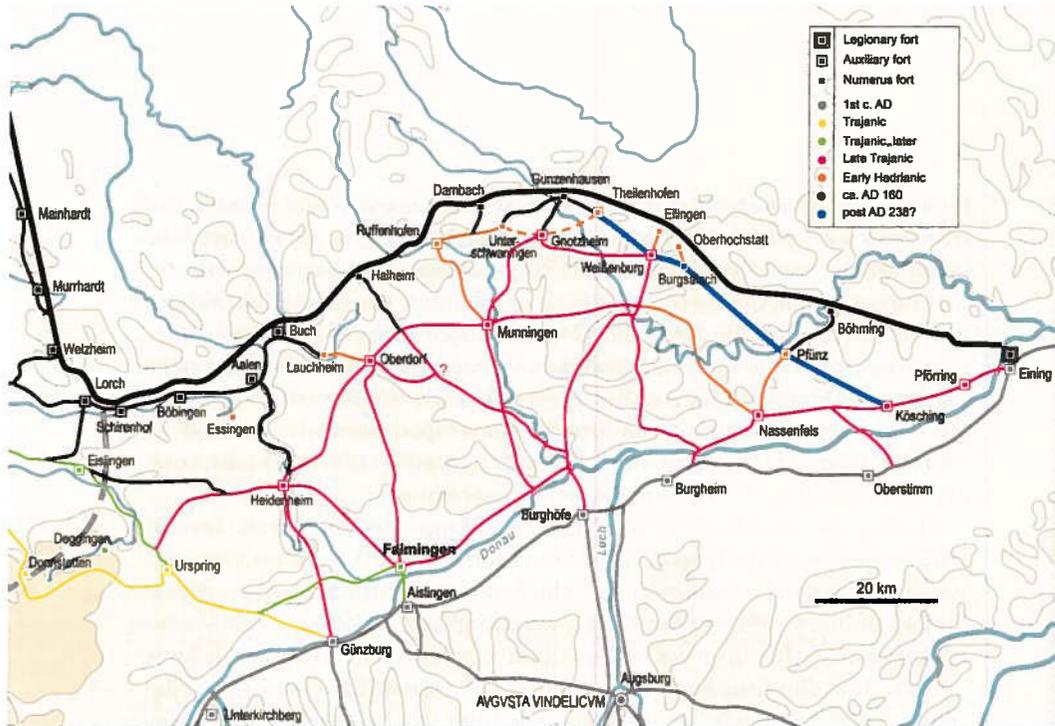


Upper Germany and Raetia about AD 200.

built further down the Danube. In this way the Romans could oversee the river and also provide support to travellers on the newly-constructed long-distance road from east to west. This southern Danube road was the first direct connection to the forts west of the Black Forest and beyond the Rhine. During this time, Kempten grew to a major centre and probably took over Auerberg's role [Auerberg had by now been abandoned]. It is not clear whether the change from a rather vague defensive strategy to a more precise linear monitoring of the frontier developed towards the end of Tiberius's reign [AD 14-37] or under Gaius Caligula (37-41). We do know, however, that Claudius [41-54] completed the programme.

During the so-called "Year of the Four Emperors" in AD 69, several Danube forts were destroyed. After Nero's suicide, Galba, Vitellius, Otto and Vespasian vied to become emperor. The Batavi took advantage of a reduced Roman military presence on the Lower Rhine and revolted, thereby contributing to further disorder in the region. Burnt levels in some of the forts indicate that the fires were set either by the retreating troops or by the rebels. After Vespasian became the sole ruler [69-79], several forts were given up and others were rebuilt, usually with new military units. Southwest Germany experienced a concentration of troops on the Upper Neckar - an entire legion was even stationed for a time in Rottweil - thanks to the construction of a new road leading from Strasbourg, through the valley of the River Kinzig and the Black Forest to the Danube. Milestones from this road still exist. In this way, travel time between the Danube and Rhine provinces was considerably shortened. Inscriptions and military diplomas (documents granting Roman citizenship to honourably discharged soldiers of the auxiliary troops) provide a good impression of the composition of the infantry, cavalry and mixed troops stationed in southern Germany. Parallel to this military development, the Romans established civil settlements from the Alpine foothills to the Danube, but the area was never uniformly or densely settled.

Titus [79-81] further fortified the southern bank of the Danube. A new series of forts was built between Günzburg and Passau\*, with inscriptions citing their construction dates. A contemporaneous inscription found in Kösching, as well as some datable timber from the region may be proof that the Romans also tried to occupy the territory along a road from Eining\* to the area of Ingolstadt on the other side of the Danube. This road was not kept in permanent use, however.

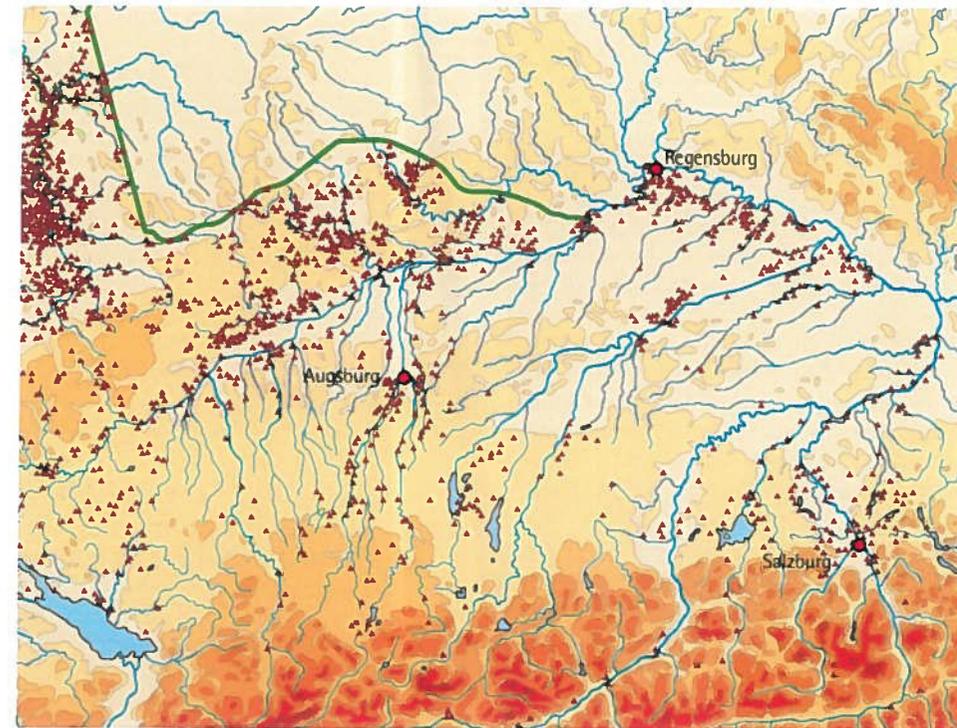


Development of the region between the Danube and the Limes.

### Barriers

Under Trajan (98–117), the Romans pushed forward their military installations to the River Main, into the Odenwald and to the mid-Neckar region. They also advanced beyond the Danube and occupied the uplands of the Swabian and Franconian Alb. In the province of Upper Germany (today partly in southwest Germany), which had been founded by Domitian (81–96), Trajan organized the construction of lines of surveillance between the rivers and to the top of the Swabian Alb. The original, monitored line was quickly built up with physical barriers (palisades and also ditches in some areas). These defensive lines are known as the Odenwald and Lautertal Limes. On the Alb in the province of Raetia, however, Trajan only built a chain of forts (Alb Limes) ending in Weißenburg\*.

The Romans' strategy was to locate the forts' sites and develop a region's infrastructure in such a way that the stationed troops could be fed locally. Both the mid-Neckar region and the Alb experienced a boom in construction, with the building of many new farms (*villae rusticae*) in previously



Civilian rural settlements in Raetia north of the Alps.

uninhabited land. It seems that a settlement programme bringing people to southern Germany from Gaul (today France), Germania west of the Rhine and perhaps northern Italy and the Danube region was responsible for this development.

The northeast expansion of the Roman Empire furthermore shortened the travelling distance between the Rhine, with the provincial capital Mainz, and the Danube, with the Raetian capital of Augsburg. New roads leading almost directly from the Stuttgart area to Günzburg were constructed. Within the newly occupied territory, communication was facilitated by a dense network of roads. In order to secure the fertile land in the northeast, the system was expanded towards the end of Trajan's reign or under Hadrian (117–138) with additional military installations between Ruffenhofen\* and Pförring\*. Inscriptions describe the renovation of some forts with stone walls in the early period of Antoninus Pius (138–161).

The forts were manned with roughly 100–800 soldiers each. These men could not, or would not, live alone, however. A large group of traders, crafts-



Course of the Limes between Raitenbuch and Oberhochstatt, at the top right Bursgalsach.

men and service personnel of all kinds accompanied the troops from the beginning. They settled in expansive areas around the forts (*vici*) and became an integral part of the military station, with official buildings, such as baths and guesthouses, incorporated in the original planning. Including cemeteries, a Roman military site thus easily covered an area of 10–20 hectares. Today, they are examined not only through excavations, but increasingly through non-invasive methods such as aerial photography and geophysical prospection.

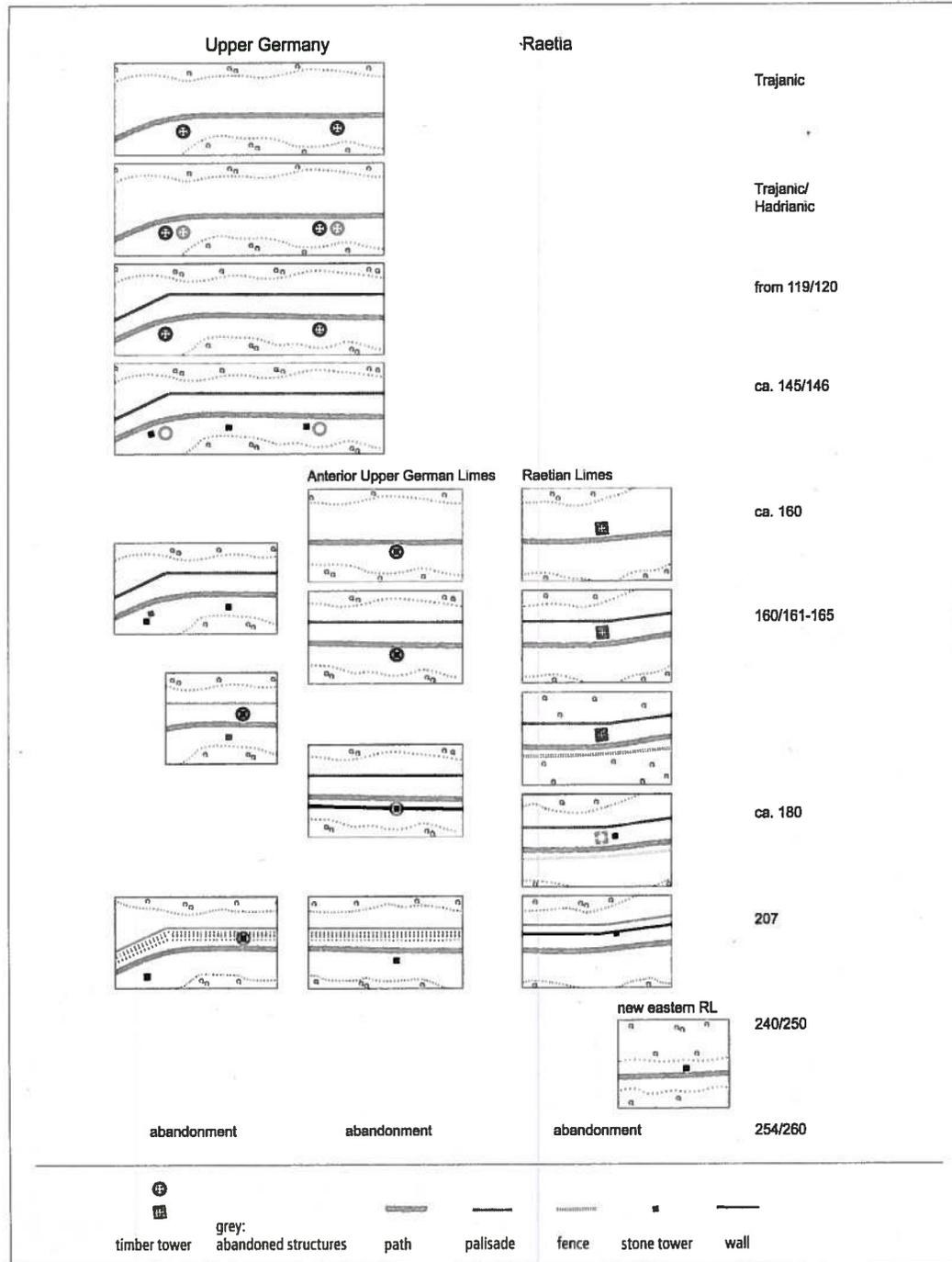
#### **The Upper German-Raetian Limes**

Around AD 160 new surveillance lines were established further to the east, between Miltenberg on the River Main and near Lorch in the Rems Valley, and north over the Alb to Eining\* on the Danube. It is likely that a uniform plan was developed, but the implementation was carried out differently in the provinces. In Upper Germany, the north-south Limes stretched for more than 80 km in an almost exactly straight line, behind which forts were erected. In Raetia, however, the west-east Limes contained shorter, relatively straight portions. At its centre, the line ran as far to the north of the older forts as possible, while still being visible from them. In the west, new forts were required to connect the Raetian Limes to the Upper German Limes.

In the beginning, the Roman Limes system consisted of a cleared swath in the woods with towers set within sight of one another to monitor the region. In Upper Germany the towers were built of stone; in Raetia uniform wooden towers were erected. We believe that the towers were three-storied constructions, manned by about four soldiers. One or two surrounding ditches created the impression of small fortlets. Within a short period of time – probably after the troops had finished the other construction projects – the soldiers erected a continuous palisade directly in front of the towers. The palisades were built mostly of halved tree trunks. The timber preserved in some sites can be dated with dendrochronology to AD 160–165.

#### **Alterations and repairs**

For strategic as well as maintenance purposes, it was necessary to renew and change the Limes continually. Fences from an unknown period have been found behind the towers of the Raetian Limes, running roughly parallel to the palisade. They may have been used to mark the area south of the



Southern end of the 80 km long, dead-straight section of the Upper German Limes at the Haghof.

palisade that should be kept clear of high growth, in order to preserve the visual connection between the towers. It is possible that sheep or goats were kept there to graze, thus saving the men from extra clearing work.

Probably in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, the posts of the wooden towers that were anchored in the ground decayed. The towers were replaced by stone towers or in some cases by fortlets measuring ca. 20 m × 20 m that were able to station 10–20 men. These probably had special functions. However, some of the fortlets, e.g. Raitenbuch, were soon torn down and others were later replaced by stone towers. It could be that alterations to the forts in Böhming\*, Ellingen\* and Pfünz\*, which inscriptions date to 180, and a final new fort – Dambach\* – were part of the same central plan.

On the Upper German Limes it was also occasionally necessary to replace towers. Thanks to the solid stone construction, though, this did not occur

often. The fortlets that have been found between the towers there may have been part of the original plan.

A major change in the planning of the Limes was made when the old and decaying palisade was replaced in Upper Germany by a ditch with a bank behind it and in Raetia by a 167 km long wall running from one stone tower to the next, the so-called "Devil's Wall". It is not known whether the bank and ditch, or the wall that was later raised between the towers in Upper Germany, were constructed at the same time as the Raetian Wall. We believe, however, that the Raetian Wall was built around the spring of 207 under Septimius Severus (193-211).

Repairs were required shortly after this period, especially on some towers, as is indicated by newer watchtowers that were attached to the wall. Some may also have been built simultaneously to the wall. A campaign of Caracalla (211-217) against the Germanic tribes has been described in written sources. The only traces that remain of this operation are honorary inscriptions that have been found at many fort sites, as well as a victory monument in Rainau-Dalkingen\*. In contrast, there were comprehensive construction projects in the more urban settlements of Neuenstadt am Kocher and Faimingen. The reason for this may lie in the Emperor's desire to seek respite from his physical and emotional suffering in the local temples to Apollo Grannus.

One last reorganization of the Limes, which by now clearly functioned as a border, seems to have occurred around AD 240 under Gordian III (238-244), when parts of a dismantled legion were deployed from northern Africa to Raetia. These soldiers erected a new line of surveillance behind the eastern part of the Raetian Limes, running along an older road between Theilenhofen\* and Pfünz\* or Kösching. Stone towers placed at relatively far distances from each other and a unique construction in Burgsalach\* - with a function that is a topic of controversy - are part of this development. The Romans may also have begun to build a new fort in Faimingen, that was intended to ensure the security of the region.

#### **The Limes comes to an end**

The second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century was characterized by internal upheaval with military altercations between many contenders to the throne - the so-called "soldier emperors" - and by external attacks led by various Germanic tribes. More and more troops were called away from the frontier to

fight the contending groups, leaving the Romans with fewer soldiers to defend the Limes against Germanic incursions. In 253 Valerian (253-260), then governor of the provinces Raetia and Noricum, seized power by commanding the majority of soldiers that had united in southern Germany against one pretender and marching over the Alps to Rome. It appears that his troops also included the African units. The vacuum left behind was capitalized on by the Germanic tribes. When they attacked in the spring or early summer of 254, they met only weak resistance at the Limes and the remaining forts and towers in southern Germany went up in flames.

As there was a lack of new soldiers and the Emperor had other, more pressing problems, the Limes was not rebuilt. Nevertheless, some of the forts on the Rhine and Danube remained in function. In the no-man's-land between the rivers, the emperors of the breakaway Gallic Empire (260-274), who ruled the western part of the Roman Empire and temporarily also Raetia, settled their new ("bought"?) allies, the Germanic tribes, as far as the banks of the River Neckar. Their goal was to establish a buffer zone to the "legitimate" empire ruled by Gallienus (sole ruler 260-268). In response, Gallienus and his successors only erected smaller defensive installations against these forces (as is indicated by the inscription from Hausen ob Lontal). Probus (276-282) began to rebuild existing military sites along the Danube into small, but strong bulwarks against the encroaching Germanic enemy (e.g. Burghöfe\*, Eining\*, Straubing\*, Passau\*). The Romans also set up new fortifications east of the River Iller (e.g. Kellmünz, Isny, the Danube-Iller Limes). Once again, the goal was to secure the passes over the Alps and into Italy. Some of these installations, mostly located along the Danube towards Passau\*, functioned far into the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD - occasionally occupied by Germanic troops - before they were abandoned or destroyed. What followed is known as the Early Middle Ages. *C. S. Sommer*