

A photograph of a sunset over a river. The sun is low on the horizon, partially obscured by a large, horizontal cloud. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and grey. In the foreground, there are dark silhouettes of trees on the left and hills in the distance. The water of the river is visible at the bottom.

The Ancient Lure of the Rhine: Roman Ships in Mainz

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Anonymous Quarterly Online #3
July 2013

Die Luft ist kühl und es dunkelt
Und ruhig fließt der Rhein;
Der Gipfel des Berges funkelt
Im Abendsonnenschein

—from Heinrich Heine's *Die Lorelei*

The air is cool and it grows dark
And quietly flows the Rhine;
The summit of the mountains glitters
In the shine of sunset.

—Author's translation

The lure and romance of the Rhine equals that of any of the great rivers of the world. Sitting on the banks, I watch the vessels of all sizes and purposes ply up and down the river as it flows northward by Mainz. Cruise ships carry tourists toward the gorge of the Rhine, with its hill-clinging vineyards and castles of pirate barons. Transport and cargo ships carry raw materials to factories and finished products to distribution points. Folklore and romance have cast the Rhine as a major character in many tales, and even in this early twenty-first century era of little romance, I still imagine older ships, antique ships oared by Germanic warriors in mail and horned helmets. And floating into my sight of fancy are Roman *navis lusorias*, the dancing ships that the Roman army built in their shipyard here in Mogontiacum, the Mainz of the first century, BCE.

The Rhine was a key thoroughfare for the Romans as they expanded their empire into northern Europe. They established a ship building facility besides the river at Mainz (or Mogontiacum) in 13-12 BCE. Two types of ships they built here were the troop transport *navis lusorias*, which means dancing or playful ship. These were manned by thirty soldier-oarsmen and also had a sail. The other type of ship built was a smaller patrol boat.

These ships and Mainz's role in their history would have remained a few sentences in the history of Ammianus Marcellinus but for a discovery in 1981. While excavating to build a Hilton Hotel in Mainz, workers found the remains of five ships, four *lusoriae* and one of the smaller patrol boats. Since 1992, the remnants of these ships have been in the Museum für Antike Schifffahrt (Museum of Ancient Seafaring). But what is more enlightening, they are on display with full-sized replicas of the two ships.



Excavated remains of the *navis lusoria* (with replica prow piece)

In 2004, I visited the museum for the first time. At that time, there was no prohibition on cameras, so I got a number of good shots. In April 2013, I revisited the exhibit with the intentions of taking photos of the workshop where replicas are still being slowly reconstructed. The workshop is a woodworker's fantasy of machines and apparatus, and it is spotless. However, no photos are permitted now. There are more interactive stations around the great hall that houses the displays, appealing to children and a generally younger audience. But the excavated remnants of the four *navis lusorias* and the patrol boat and their replicas are still the center of attention, and they are fascinating. Study them long and longingly; then walk down to the Rhine at sunset and see if you can see their shades floating down river in the glimmering light.



Replica of the *navis lusoria* with 30 oars for the soldier-oarsmen and an unfurled sail ready to ship down the Rhine. The smaller patrol boat is to the left.



The smaller patrol boat manned by fourteen soldier-oarsmen. Notice what looks like a winch-drawn arrow-launcher in the bow area. Is this the prototype for the PT boats of WWII?



This bas relief found among the Roman ruins of ancient Mogontiacum (Mainz) portrays a cargo vessel, probably a wine ship that hauled good Rhenish back in the first century, BCE.

Colophon

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Anonymous Quarterly Online #3 (July 2013) for the AAPA