

THE RHINE. LIFE ALONG THE RIVER – AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL JOURNEY FROM PREHISTORY TO THE MIDDLE AGES

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The LVR-LandesMuseum in Bonn is currently preparing a novel, monumental permanent archaeological exhibition that will launch in 2027. Before it opens, visitors can get a glimpse into the preparations and the diverse material, some of which are put on display in a temporary exhibition.

This temporary spectacle focuses on the Rhine itself and the everyday life of the settlements on the river-bank, from the Stone Age to the early Middle Ages. The Rhine is one of the most important rivers in Western Europe. Its source is in Switzerland among mountains over 2,000 meters high, where it still has two branches, the Upper and Lower Rhine, which converge at Reichenau in the province of Graubünd. From there, the Rhine travels 1,230 kilometers through Switzerland, Liechtenstein, France, and Germany until it reaches the Dutch Plains, where it flows into the North Sea through the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt delta. Over the millennia, people settled on both sides of this long and sometimes considerably wide river, and the legacies of several different ethnic groups are present on its banks. Approximately 200 artefacts, including finds presented for the first time, are on display in the exhibition, comprised of eight parts or chapters. The display cases contain, among other things, a variety of Celtic objects, luxury items from the Roman Period, and a unique early medieval wooden boat. In addition, illustrative reconstructions show how the Rhine has shaped and changed people's lives and the environment over the millennia.

As a preview of the exhibition's highlights, I would like to mention three finds in particular. The first is a 14,000-year-old double burial from the Late Paleolithic, discovered in 1914 in the Bonn-Oberkassel area. The grave yielded the skeletons of a man and a woman, as well as a puppy that became famous as the oldest known domestic dog, and was a huge sensation at the time. The animal's teeth show signs of damage that could be linked to a disease called canine distemper, and experts believe that the puppy was cared for by humans. In the past century, researchers gained access to new tools and methods that allow them to reconstruct past events and customs with greater accuracy than ever before. Modern analyses provide novel information on the diet, diseases, and origins of the buried individuals. This grave proves that hunter-gatherers of the Stone Age found excellent living conditions and opportunities for obtaining food along the Rhine.



Fig. 1. Exhibition poster featuring the Rhenus bicornis relief

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Fig. 2. Dual burial with a puppy from Bonn–Oberkassel
(© LVR-Landesmuseum Bonn, photo by Jürgen Vogel)



Fig. 3. Face mask of a Roman cavalry helmet
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The next find is particularly interesting because it underwent extensive restoration so that museum visitors can now see it in all its glory. It is the face mask of a cavalry helmet, found in rather poor condition in 1995 in Dornmagen, a Roman cavalry fort. Conservators had to reassemble the artefact from 400 corroded metal pieces. Masks of this type were part of the ceremonial equipment of Roman cavalry, worn primarily during parades and processions.

Finally, I would like to highlight the so-called *Rhenus bicornis* relief, which was chosen as the central image for the exhibition poster. The stone relief depicts Rhenus, the Roman river god who personified the Rhine. The name *Rhenus* is the Latin equivalent of the Rhine, while *bicornis* means ‘two-horned’. The Rhine was particularly revered by soldiers living on the border of the Empire, who called it *Rhenus bicornis* as a sign of respect, emphasizing the river’s life-giving and protective functions. This piece of art is a spectacular relic of the culture and beliefs of the people who lived along the Rhine.

Presentation of the diverse find material is only the beginning; in line with current trends, we also gain an insight into the preparatory work for the new permanent archaeological exhibition. What is the restoration process? How are new research results incorporated into the exhibition design? How are the interactive stations set up? Nine thematic display cases present various aspects of the preparation, from the restoration of artefacts to educational ideas, thus providing a rare glimpse at the behind-the-scenes museum life.

This temporary display was created with the intention to arouse interest and curiosity about the future permanent exhibition at the LandesMuseum in Bonn, which will open in two years’ time.



Fig. 4. Celtic coins
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