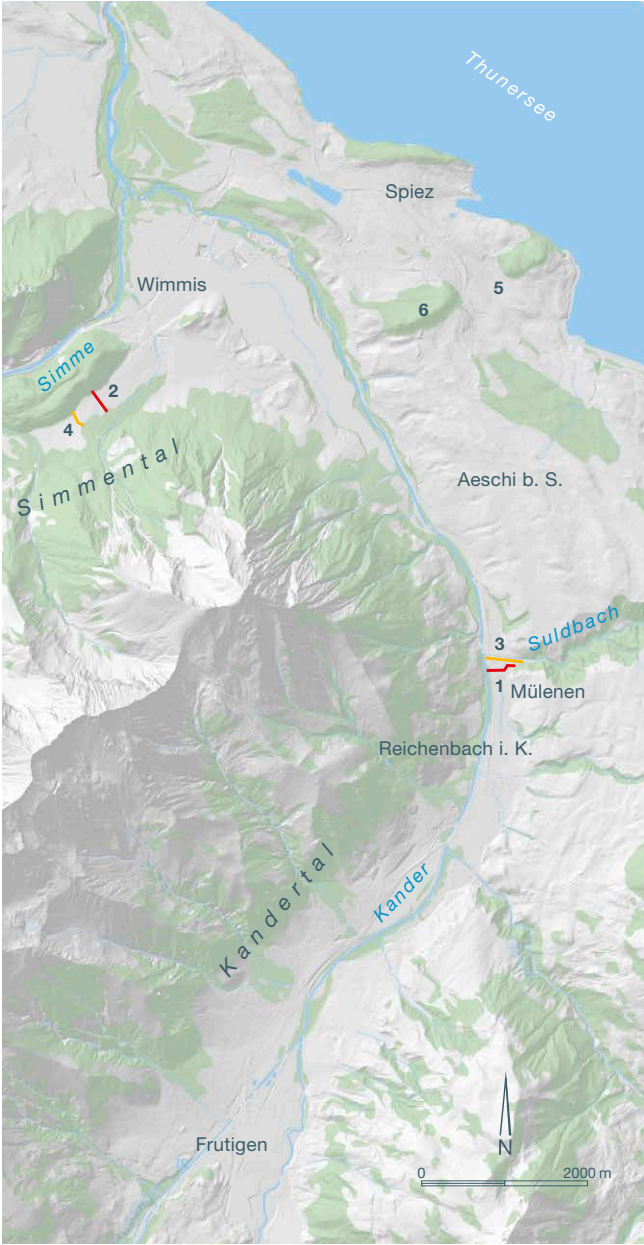


Overview map showing the entrances to the Simmental and Kandertal valleys



The map shows the two *Letzi* structures (1 and 2) and the barrages from the Second World War (3 and 4) with associated military installations including the Faulensee artillery fortification (5) with four 10.5 cm cannon and the Hondrich observation post (6).

Second World War barrages

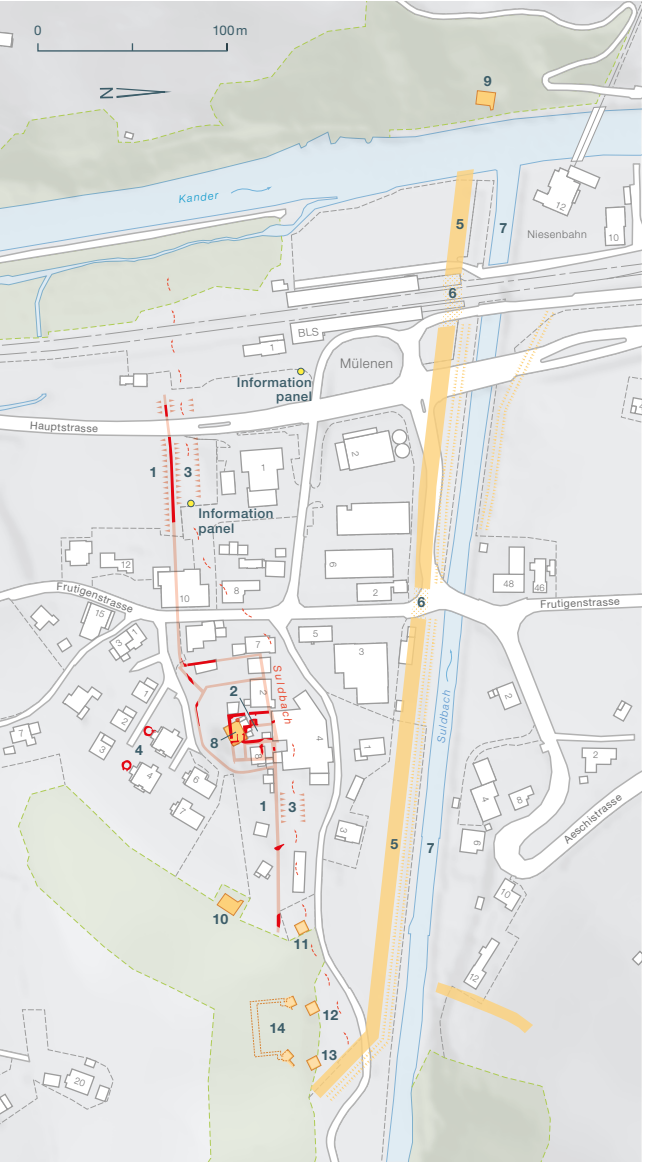
In 1941, the Swiss Army received orders to secure the Bernese Oberland “with an emphasis on the entrances to the Simmental and Kandertal valleys”. This led to the construction of a whole series of fortifications, which included the Mülenen barrage constructed in the same narrow point as the medieval *Letzi*. The structure had multiple sections. From north to south, there were six rows of dragon’s teeth, road barricades, walls, primed explosives and flood booby traps. Straightened in 1867, the Suldbach stream was extended to form a concrete trough 14.5 m wide and 3.5 m deep, which was designed to serve as an anti-tank obstacle. On the enemy-facing side there were anti-infantry obstacles, mines, barricades and booby traps, intended, among other things, to sabotage the Lötschberg railway line. The position was further reinforced by an infantry fortification in the Suldschlucht gorge and three infantry bunkers armed with machine guns, infantry support weapons and anti-tank cannon. The main bunker was built near the ruined castle, which was why an archaeological examination was carried out prior to its construction.

The narrow point of the valley at Wimmis was also reinforced during the Second World War. Five rows of dragon’s teeth and a road barricade were installed some 370 m further up the hill from the medieval *Letzi* structure, and an infantry bunker and a flanking bunker were built into Burgfluh mountain behind them.



Construction of dragon's teeth in 1941 during the Second World War.

Mülenen and its barrages



The medieval barrage (red): 1 *Letzi* wall; 2 castle; 3 original course of the Suldbach stream; 4 lime kilns used during construction of the castle and *Letzi*.

The barrage of 1941/42 (orange): 5 dragon’s teeth; 6 barricades; 7 Suldbach stream converted into an anti-tank trench; 8 infantry bunker at the ruined castle on the hill; 9 Niesen/Kander infantry bunker; 10 infantry bunker at the foot of the mountain; 11 infantry fortification in the Suldschlucht gorge; 12–14 concrete infantry shelters.

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The *Letzi* defensive structures at Reichenbach, Mülenen and Wimmis, Spissi

References: Marco Amstutz and Lara Tremblay, Reichenbach, Mülenen. Drei Kalkbrennöfen auf der mittelalterlichen Baustelle der Letzi Mülenen. Archäologie Bern / Archéologie bernoise 2018, 86–88; Werner Wild, Reichenbach, Burg und Letzi Mülenen. Die Rettungsgrabungen von 1941 und 1990–1996. Bern 1997; Detlef Wulf, Die Letzi in Wimmis, Spissi. Schutzmauer, Grenzbefestigung oder Grenzzeichen. Archäologie Bern / Archéologie bernoise 2012, 205–219.

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Adriano Boschetti and Armand Baeriswyl (text),
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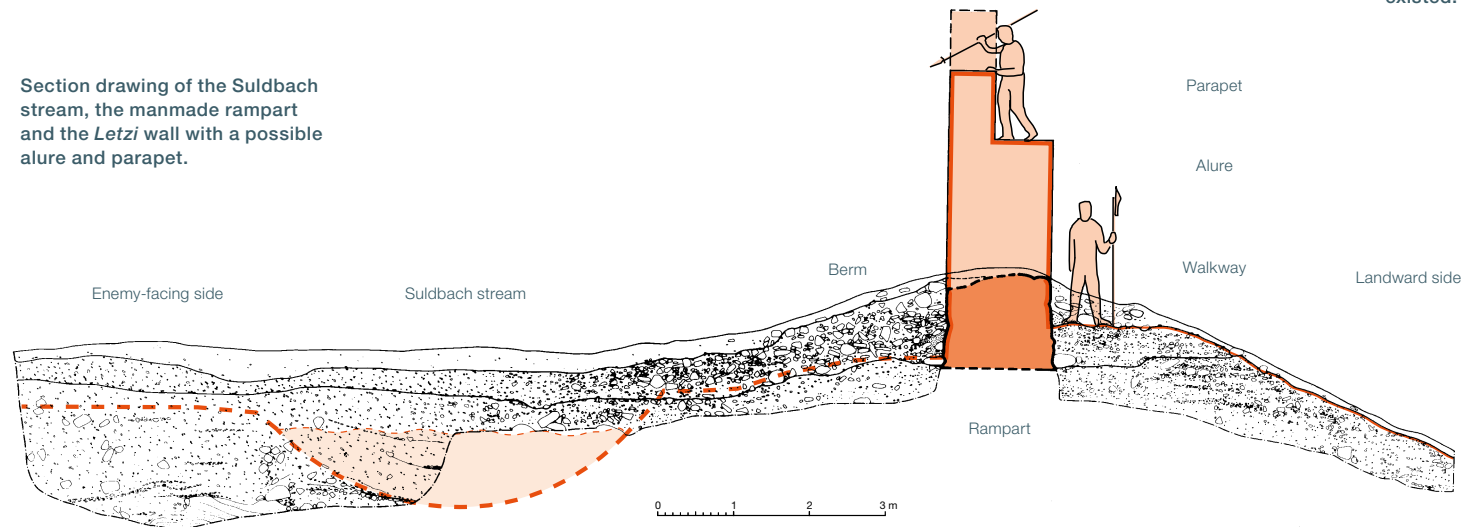


Both Mülönen and Wimmis were well positioned to control and potentially block the narrow entrance into two of the inner Alpine valleys, the Kandertal and the Simmental, in times of war. During the Middle Ages this was achieved by constructing a *Letzi* and a castle, while in the Second World War the Swiss Army did the same by building bar-rages. Imposing remains from both epochs are still visible in the landscape today.



Mülönen Castle was not just a stronghold but was also the home of a medieval aristocratic family. Their elegant lifestyle was attested to by a boxwood chess piece found during the excavations. The turned figure is round, 4.8 cm in diameter and 4.5 cm in height and was richly decorated with a ring-and-dot design. Probably a queen, it even has remnants of gilding.

Section drawing of the Suldbach stream, the manmade rampart and the *Letzi* wall with a possible alure and parapet.



In 1331, Bernese troops seized the castle and *Letzi*, which at the time was occupied by the Lords of Turn. In a chronicle dated to between 1468 and 1484, Diebold Schilling mentions a “stetli mülinon” [small town of Mülinon], although no such town ever existed.



Wall on the valley side of the “Spissi” *Letzi* at Wimmis during the archaeological examination carried out in 1995. View towards the south-west.

Letzi defensive structures and their functions

A *Letzi* was a medieval type of fortification or earthwork, usually erected at the entrance to a valley, but also sometimes on the border of a territory or to fortify the shore of a lake. It could be as simple as a dense hedgerow or a ditch and rampart, or as substantial as a palisade or could even consist of walls several metres high with arrow slits and battlements.

Letzi structures were used to maintain control over the entrance to a valley, to prevent or at least slow down incursions by enemy forces or to impede cattle raids. For this purpose, gates were often erected on rural roads and reinforced with towers or even castles. *Letzi* structures also served as fences to secure pastures and mark boundaries, and sometimes even as protective barriers against the forces of nature. They were also used by rulers to display their power, as in the case of the imposing fortifications at Bellinzona built in the 15th century by the Dukes of Milan.

Most *Letzi* structures were erected in the Alpine region, in the Jura mountains and in the southern Black Forest. In the lowlands, defensive structures (*Landwehr*) mainly consisted of earthworks in the form of ditches and ramparts planted with dense hedgerows to mark and secure the boundaries of a settlement, usually a town or city. There, too, the gateways on the rural highways were often reinforced by towers. Not many *Letzi* structures still survive as field monuments; extant examples can be found at Mülönen, Wimmis, Näfels and at the entrances to the Valley of Schwyz.

Mülönen *Letzi* and Castle – History and archaeological features

First mentioned in records as Mulinon Castle in 1269, Mülönen was one of the centres of power of the Barons of Kien at the entrance to the Kandertal valley. It had a *Letzi* cutting across the valley and an associated settlement with a chapel. Having changed hands several times, the territory finally fell to the city of Bern in 1352. A castellan was appointed and installed in the castle to oversee the bailiwick. In the 15th century, the bailiwick was merged with that of Frutigen and from then on, the castellan resided in Frutigen’s Tellenburg Castle. Mülönen Castle and its *Letzi* were abandoned.

Both the castle and the *Letzi* wall were used as a source of building materials until the 20th century. The remains of the castle were documented when a military barrage was constructed as part of the official Second World War defence strategy in 1941. Several construction projects between 1990 and 1996 prompted the Archaeological Service of Canton Bern to carry out investigations

and conservation work. A 1.5 m thick and probably around 5 m high defensive wall was erected on top of a raised rampart in the second half of the 13th century. On the inside, a walkway ran along the foot of the wall. The irregular structure of the masonry suggests that the wall was hastily built. A berm or shelf partway up the slope and the diverted Suldbach stream impeded enemy access from the north. Today the historical land relief can still be made out between today’s petrol station and the remains of the *Letzi* wall east of the modern bypass road.

The castle was built in c. 1200 just east of the road where we believe the gate used to be. The compound consisted of a fortified residence or a residential tower on a footprint of 10x19 m with a surrounding courtyard and an enclosing wall. A 3.5 m deep well was sunk in the courtyard. Outside the enclosing wall was a dry moat and the material excavated from it was built up against the enclosing wall so that it looked like the castle was built on top of a mound. The outer edge of the ditch was fortified by a counter-mure.

The *Letzi* structures at Wimmis

The main route into the Simmental valley used to run south of Wimmis between Burgfluh mountain and the foot of Niesen mountain. Known as “Spissi”, the narrowest point was fortified by a *Letzi* during the Middle Ages and is still recognisable as a terrace of some 50 m in length running across the valley with a dense hedgerow on top. Initially the structure served as a protective barrier against rock falls or mudslides while also probably representing the border between the Weissenburg and Kiburg territories. At some stage, a 4 m wide rampart was built, which was later reinforced by a 1.8 m thick wall running parallel to it at a distance of 6 m with a paved walkway on the inside. This was probably what it looked like in the period between 1288 and 1334. We know that it existed at the time of one of the Bernese campaigns against the Barons of Weissenburg at Wimmis in 1331. Two other *Letzi* structures are known from historical records only; they are most likely to have reinforced the banks of the Simme river between the Simmenfluh and Burgfluh mountains.