

## From the beginning to the Romans

### Prehistoric times

The climate and topography attracted the earliest settlers to what is now present-day Switzerland. Several cold periods allowed the alpine glaciers to advance, so much so that for a time the entire area was covered in ice, wiping out almost all vestiges of its former human occupants. As the glaciers retreated, the area was resettled by people from neighbouring regions. However, permanent and widespread settlement in Switzerland only began some 11,000 years ago thanks to the arrival of the current warm interglacial period. From the beginning, cultural development was shaped by the settlers' contact with many other communities. The archaeological finds and the physical traces left by human activity in the area are a mine of information about the lives of these early occupants, as well as the ideas and techniques they devised and used.



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## **Lakeside settlements**



*Underwater archaeology in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: looking for prehistoric lakeside settlements in Lake Geneva. (© Stefan Rebsamen/Bern Historical Museum)*

Some of the most interesting archaeological finds in Switzerland are those of the lakeside settlements and their houses built on wooden stilts. The oldest of these pile dwellings date back to the end of the 5th millennium BC. They have been found from Lake Geneva to Lake Constance, as well as in Switzerland's neighbouring countries.

The settlers built their houses on wooden stilts along the lakeside to maximise the amount of valuable farming land they had at their disposal. However, fluctuating water levels meant that residents were often forced to leave the villages when levels became dangerously high. Save for several short-lived or extended periods of abandon, these prehistoric pile dwellings were inhabited for some 3,000 years.

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## Helvetians and Raetians



*Bronze hydria showing the Mistress of the Animals: decoration from a water pot found in a Celtic burial mound in Grächwil in the canton of Bern. It is thought to have been produced in a Tarento workshop (southern Italy) in around 580-570 BC and is evidence of the existence of transalpine trade. (© Historical Museum Bern)*

One of the best-known archaeological sites in Switzerland is the Celtic village and ritual site of **La Tène** on Lake Neuchâtel. It also gives its name to the culture of the late Iron Age in Europe, which lasted from around 460 BC to 15 BC. It was during this time that written records from the Mediterranean area first referred, by name, to tribes living in the region which is now Switzerland.

The Helvetians, from whom the Latin name of Switzerland is derived (Helvetia), were a Celtic tribe and were first mentioned at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. It is not known if they had already been living in the Swiss plateau area at that time, or if they moved there later.

A few alpine valleys in Eastern Switzerland were inhabited by the Raetians who, according to an ancient writer, were descendants of the Etruscans. The name of these people is why the Romansh language spoken in Graubünden today is sometimes referred to as Raeto-Romanic.

## The Romans

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC the Romans seized southern Ticino. By 121 BC they had conquered southern France, including the territory of the Allobroges, which extended as far as Geneva. These conquests gave the Romans control over the route that led from Italy to Spain.

In 58 BC, Julius Caesar prevented the Helvetians, led by Divico, from leaving the Swiss Plateau and migrating to Gaul. They were stopped at Bibracte (Mont Beuvray in the French département of Saône-et-Loire) and forced to return. Both Caesar, who was assassinated in 44 BC, and his successors strengthened their grip over the territory with the creation of two large Roman settlements: the Colonia Iulia Equestris (the town of Nyon on the shores of Lake Geneva) and the Colonia (Augusta) Raurica (Augst am Rhein outside Basel). Under Emperor Augustus, Roman expansion continued northwards in 14 AD. One year later, the Romans had conquered the Alpine valleys of Valais (though this may have happened earlier), upper Ticino as well as the valleys of Graubünden, parts of which were inhabited by the Raetians. As a result, the entire territory of what is now Switzerland was subsumed into the Roman Empire.

In a bid to extend his empire northwards, Emperor Augustus had already endeavoured to cross the Rhine. The defeat of Varus in 9 BC in the Teutoberg forest (Kalkriese in Osnabrück, Germany) would put an end to Roman aspirations of a northern expansion. Vindonissa (present-day Windisch, outside Brugg), which stood at the confluence of the Rivers Aare and Reuss, was the site of the only Roman legion camp in Switzerland, housing around 9,000 men. It was not until 79 AD that the Romans, under Emperor Vespasian, succeeded in capturing Southern Germany, with Switzerland falling into what would have been its hinterland. The Romans erected the limes – a fortified frontier line – which is still visible in Southern Germany today. In 101 AD Emperor Trajan withdrew the legion from Vindonissa and stationed the men on the Danube (Hungary). With the fall of the limes, the Rhine once again became the frontier.

## Life under the Romans



*Dea Artio, the bear goddess, from Muri, canton of Bern, ca. 200 AD. The statuette is an example of how two cultures mixed. The Celts were happy to depict their deities in animal form, whereas the Romans gave them human shape. (© Stefan Rebsamen/Historical Museum Bern)*

In Roman times, Switzerland was not a single political unit. Its territory was divided between five different Roman provinces. The Romans limited their activities to maintaining peace and order, expanding their empire northwards and repelling enemy incursions. This was why a Roman legion camp was set up in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD in Vindonissa (modern-day Windisch, near to Brugg), which housed some 9,000 men. Given the considerable size of the provinces, the Roman administration relied on the local authorities, which were run by indigenous officials, to manage the areas and their towns independently. Initially, only the local elite were granted Roman citizenship. Later, the privilege was extended to the rest of the population. By 212 all freemen in the Empire were Roman citizens.

The Helvetians also adopted many aspects of Roman life (Romanisation). Large towns and smaller urban centres (vici) were established; centres of economic activities in the form of large country houses (villae) began to spring up, often comprising luxurious mansions with a plethora of annexes (e.g. Neftenbach, Orbe-Boscéaz). Thermal baths and central heating were commonplace in these grand houses, as were mosaic decorations and wall frescoes. Likewise, the locals began to worship Roman gods alongside their own Celtic deities. The result was the emergence of a provincial Gallo-Roman religious culture. The provinces also adopted the imperial cult as a tangible expression of their loyalty towards Rome. Latin became the official language (although in some instances Celtic dialects were still spoken). Reading and writing became a widespread cultural tool, as evidenced by graffiti found on vessels and pots.

The area that is now Switzerland was an important transit route under the Romans, who maintained and even extended the roads over several of the passes. From Chiavenna one could reach Chur via the mountain passes in Graubünden (Splügen, Septimer, Maloja/Julier), while the Rhine Valley provided a direct route to Bregenz. However, the centre of the Roman empire in Switzerland was in the west: the Helvetian territory and its capital Aventicum was the hub for road and river transport. The quickest link from Rome to the Rhine continued over the Great St Bernhard Pass in Valais, to Vevey, Aventicum, Solothurn, then on to Augst and Strasbourg; an alternative route passed through Lausanne and Orbe to Pontarlier and Besançon. The West-East axis connected Aventicum, via Augusta Raurica, to Vindonissa, Pfyn and Bregenz. Martigny at the foot of the Great Saint Bernhard Pass became an important administrative centre, while Geneva gained great importance as a transit point for goods being transferred from water to road.

### **Outside threats, a new order and the fall of the Western Roman Empire**

In 260 AD the Germanic Alemanni broke through the Upper German-Raetian limes and invaded the Swiss plateau. Between 275 and 277 they pillaged and partially destroyed Augusta Raurica and Aventicum. The limes was abandoned and the Rhine once again became the frontier line. Diocletian (300) reorganised the empire and rebuilt and strengthened forts along the Rhine border. In 352, during a battle against usurpers, Alemanni loyal to the emperor set fire to the large fort (castrum) in Kaiseraugst. Later, the Rhine frontier would be secured with watchtowers (known as the Rhine Limes), and the population protected themselves further by building hilltop settlements.

The Germanic peoples of northern and eastern Europe drove further into the empire, pushed westward by Huns and other mounted tribes migrating from Central Asia. Prepared to fight off any new invaders, they demanded money and settlement in return for their military services. The army of the Western Roman Empire became completely germanised. To fend off the Visigoths in northern Italy, in 400 the Roman army general Stilicho withdrew the frontier troops from the Rhine. In 443 Aetius settled the defeated Burgundians in Savoy and in Western Switzerland. Following the dismissal of the last Western Roman Emperor (476), the area north of the Alps was left to fend for itself, and the administration crumbled. In the 6<sup>th</sup>

century, the Alemanni, together with a few Frankish settlers, invaded Northern Switzerland. Following the collapse of the Burgundy Empire (534) and the end of the Ostrogothic protectorate over eastern and southern Switzerland, the entire territory, with the exception of Valais (invaded by the Lombards in 574), became part of the Frankish empire.