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## The Archaeology and History of Ancient Switzerland: Recent Developments

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## GUEST LECTURERS

### Gilbert KAENEL

Professor, Head of the Cantonal Museum for Archaeology and History in Lausanne (Switzerland),  
invited by the Assembly of the Professors  
on the proposition of Prof Christian Goudineau.

He gave four public lectures in January and February 2009 entitled:  
**The Archaeology and History of Ancient Switzerland: Recent Developments.**



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The extraordinary development of archaeology, in particular preventive archaeology, in the last thirty or forty years, has yielded a considerable amount of material documents and contextual information which need to be approached and analysed from a historical perspective. Focusing on the study of contemporary Switzerland, more specifically the Middle Land between the Jura mountains and the Alps, these lectures situated Switzerland and its arbitrary borders within a wider research dynamics which included France and Germany, among others. They drew on research currently in progress, most of it unpublished, whose authors were properly acknowledged.

### The Celts, the Helvetii and their Neighbors

The first lecture opened with an overview of the history of research in Swiss archaeology since the middle of the 19th century and its indisputable achievements (dendrochronology, Celtic burial sites from the 5th to the 2nd century BC, eponymous site of La Tène...). It stressed the continuous occupation of the territory for about a thousand years, from the Late Bronze Age to the beginning of the Roman period. Although the presence of a Helvetian is attested by a graffiti in Mantova (Italy), his origin cannot be determined: Did he come from Southern Germany, as some ancient sources (e.g. Tacitus) indicate? Or from the Swiss Plateau if we favor archaeological data? "Material culture" (funeral rites, costume,

decorations, archaeological objects...) allows us however to distinguish in the 1st century BC between the alpine people of the Valais (Nantuates, Veragri, Seduni, Uberi), the southern alpine people of Graubünden and Ticino (Raeti, Lepontii), the Helvetii of the Swiss Plateau and even their neighbors from Geneva (Allobroges) and the Basel region (Rauraci). The archaeology of the territory assigned to the Helvetii in Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum* has brought to light two concentrated areas with distinct finds: a western one which we may attribute to the *pagus* of the Tigurini, and an eastern one, both distinguished by the remarkable absence of any connections between them.

### Helvetii oppida

The first Helvetii towns were the subject of the second lecture. In the course of one generation, the scope of reflexions on this topic has been considerably broadened by excavations and research: four new ramparts, two new *oppida*, and a profound overhaul of existing interpretations... The finer chronological sequences of the second half of the 2nd and 1st centuries BC (about 25 years) are no stranger to these reappraisals. A few examples will suffice. Situated in the western part of the Plateau, Bern (Brenodurum according to a zinc plate unearthed in 1984), is without doubt the Helvetii's main *oppidum* with 140 hectares, a rampart made of frontal posts, several settlement layers, areas reserved for worship (deposit, sanctuaries), and a few clusters of tombs outside the walls.

By contrast, Mont Vully, a large stronghold of about 50 hectares established about 120 BC overlooking the lakes of Morat and Neuchâtel (and La Tène directly below), remained practically unoccupied. Yverdon-les Bains, on a shoreline at the other tip of Lake Neuchâtel, is a smaller site of about 3 to 4 hectares settled as of the 4th century BC and fortified in 80 BC with a formidable rampart made of frontal posts, as in Mont Vully. This *oppidum* (Eburodunum) would become a vicus, like that of Bern, during the first centuries AD. In eastern Switzerland, we should mention the double *oppidum* of Altenburg (Germany) and of Rheinau on the Rhine, as well as Zurich where recent finds at the heart of the medieval town have established without a doubt that, contrary to what had been written for decades, there did exist a Late La Tène settlement under the vicus of Turicum. Moreover, the rampart of the *oppidum* at Windisch was uncovered as late as 2003 after more than a hundred years of excavations in the Roman camps of Vindonissa! By contrast, little is known about agricultural complexes and farms on the territory attributed to the Helvetii: if we follow the figures given by Caesar, we can identify about a dozen *oppida*, but we are very far from the 400 *vici* and numerous *privata aedificia*!

### Tombs and places of worship: breaks and traditions

This was the subject of the third lecture. Information provided by the world of the dead, in spite of the paucity of

tombs, opens the door to an understanding of persons and their identity within the group by studying changes in costume and ornaments. A break in the occupation of burial sites can be observed during the first half of the 2nd century BC together with the revival of cremation rites. As with dwelling places, archaeology enables us to divide the Swiss Plateau according to funeral practices but we should not rush to assimilate *de facto* such changes in these practices to breaks in the settlement (although we wish archaeology could have helped us corroborate ancient sources which alluded to the “arrival” of the Helvetii on the Swiss Plateau from Southern Germany....).

As far as the broad sphere of worship is concerned, new investigations and discoveries have added to an expanding body of knowledge: the La Tène site, on the banks of the Thielle River at the easternmost tip of Lake Neuchâtel, whose 150th anniversary of the discovery was celebrated in November 2007, played a central role, on a par with Alésia and later Bibracte, in the definition of the Late Iron Age which bears its name. La Tène is viewed today, like the sanctuaries of Belgian Gaul (especially Gournay-sur-Aronde), as a sacred spot where war trophies were being displayed in the late 3rd century BC, together with an array of ornaments and objects of

domestic life (over 4000 items) whose inventory and analysis are under way. Horse skulls on spears, human craniums showing traces of violence and *peri-mortem* handling are also part of this elaborate display. The exceptional site at the top of the Mormont hill, between the Jura mountains and Lake Geneva, was discovered in the Summer of 2006 and is still being excavated: some 300 pits dug deep to receive offerings have yielded dozens of sacrificed animals which were either hurled headlong into the pits or quartered beforehand. About thirty human skeletons, some buried in a crouching position inside trunks (as in Acy-Romance in Picardy), others showing traces of dismemberment or whose flesh had been removed, are strewn among animal bones and archaeological objects which probably stood for offerings. Among the ornamental objects (fibulae, glass pearls...), the metal and ceramics containers, the tools for agriculture or craft, and the nearly hundred grindstones, not a single trace of weapon was found! What event(s), what fervor could account for such extensive sacrifices, a mere generation or two before the Conquest of Gaul, as the Cimbri and the Teutones were raiding the land? What God, what divinities were being worshipped there? Chtonian? Fertility? It is difficult to answer in the absence of historical sources.

#### After the Conquest of Gaul: Gallo-Roman “Switzerland”

The final lecture dealt with the end of Helvetii independence and the gradual fall of their territory into the orbit of Rome. The various political and administrative breaks cannot obscure the existence of an indisputable cultural continuity which can be observed in particular in religious practices. We shall only mention here the exemplary case of Aventicum-Avenches, the future capital of Roman Helvetia. Latenian evidence has mushroomed in the last twenty years, especially in a wide area where numerous temples would be erected: cremations from the second

half of the 2nd century BC, bodies buried in a crouching position under the eastern entrance of what would become a circular temple, Caesarian vestiges probably related to banquet practices, in short numerous traces that testify to the persistence, as of the Late La Tène period, of the sacred vocation of this sector, east of which the Gallo-Roman city would develop. The *oppidum* of Bois de Châtel overlooking the plain near Avenches has yielded a coin bearing the name of Vatico which can be traced back by its coinage to an earlier find; these point no doubt to a Helvetian (Tigurian?) nobleman, such as the famed Divico of history books.

As far as military aspects are concerned, surveys in 2007-2008 at the Col des Etroits, the Jura pass that connects Pontarlier and Yverdon, have uncovered nails from the *caligae* of legionnaires (Roman and/or auxiliary), some weapons and various objects dated between the defeat of the Gauls at Alésia and the beginning of the Augustan age, namely in the third quarter of the 1st century BC. Their presence will need explaining. In eastern Switzerland, at the foot of the Alps and along the Rhine, the current re-evaluation of the dates and meaning of towers and camps known for centuries leans toward viewing them as strategic advance posts for Augustus’ planned German campaigns. In the Alps, among the Raeti, evidence of the crossing of Roman troops which took part in the campaigns of Drusus and Tiberius in 15 BC has been confirmed by shoe nails, a handful of weapons and ornaments, and catapult balls from the third, tenth and twelfth legion. Fights there involved a local population unable to oppose the might of the Roman army.

The revisions of history induced by archaeological discoveries of the past thirty or forty years are thus far from insignificant; they illustrate the necessary dialogue between different yet complementary aspects and approaches of the sciences of Antiquity. ■



The site of the Mormont (Canton of Vaud, Switzerland)  
Bronze situla with iron clips and handle  
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